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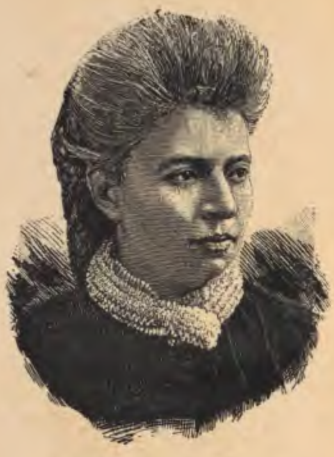

E. Orzeszko.

MEIR EZOFOVITCH

A Novel

FROM THE POLISH OF ELIZA ORZESZKOWA

TRANSLATED BY

IZA YOUNG

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MEIR EZOFOVITCH.

PROLOGUE.

In one of the remotest corners of Volhynia, at a great distance from the railway and the navigable river Dewina, in the midst of a vast plain, at the conjunction of two sandy high-roads, which, at a distance, lose themselves in the depth of the forest, lies a little town of some eight hundred houses ; some are very small, others larger, but all cling close together, as if for mutual protection and company. The name of the town is Szybow, and its inhabitants are mostly Israelites, more so than any other Polish town, as the whole Christian element is represented by one little street, on the outskirts, inhabited by people of the artisan class. It is the only street which is quiet and where flowers are to be seen in summer time. No flowers are to be found in any other part of the town, and there is a constant noise. People are continually on the move, running, talking, and gesticulating frantically, either inside their houses or in the dirty lanes, called streets by courtesy. On the wide market-square innumerable little doors open into evil-smelling shops, heaps of dirt and rubbish, showing the amount of business done from week to week, with the country people around. Over and above all this noise and dirt rises a stately building of a quaint character, an excellent specimen of Israelitish architecture, and as such interesting to the painter and the archæologist. One glance is sufficient to show it is a place of worship, and yet it is unlike any other place of worship. The four high and massive walls present the monotonous lines of a square, the dark-brown color stained here and there by patches of silvery or orange lichen gives them the impression of sadness and dignity. The long rows of narrow windows at a great distance from a base are not unlike the portholes of a fortress, the heavy, three-storied roof looks like three giant, lichen-stained mushrooms one above the other. Under the shadow of this venerable pile nestle all the principal buildings; a low, two-windowed dwelling, blackened by age, is the abode of the far-famed Rabbi Todros, occupied for centuries by one of the same family.

Whilst in other parts of the town the people are almost smothered in mud or dust, the precincts of the sacred buildings are maintained in perfect order and cleanliness; the court is paved with white and even stones, on which not even a stray leaf or blade of straw are allowed to linger.

The importance attached to the little town, not only by its own inhabitants, but also by their co-religionists of the adjacent provinces, may be fitly illustrated by a short dialogue between a nobleman and his Jewish factor. Smiling and cap in hand, the latter stood waiting in the door. The nobleman was in a jovial mood and inclined to be facetious.

"Chaimek," he said, "have you ever been in Cracow?"

"No, illustrious Pan, I have never been there," said the Jew.

"That makes you feel very small, eh, Chaimek?"

"Chaimek! have you seen Rome?"

"No, illustrious Pan, I have not seen Rome."

"Then you are a very foolish and ignorant Chaimek."

The Jew drew a few steps nearer, about his lips a smile so typical of his shrewd race, which might express anything, humble flattery, consciousness of power, or veiled sarcasm.

"I beg the illustrious Pan's pardon," he said softly, "but has the illustrious Pan ever been in Szybow?"

Szybow was some twenty leagues distant from where the above dialogue took place.

"No, I have never been in Szybow," said the nobleman.

"Who is to judge now," gently murmured Chaimek.

It is not known whether the nobleman appreciated his factor's retaliation, but it shows that Szybow was to Chaimek of the same importance as Cracow and Rome to his master, the centre of his civil and religious authority.

If Chaimek had been further questioned why he attached so much importance to a little out-of-the-way place, he would have mentioned the two families of Ezofovitch and Todros.

The first represented wealth and worldly power, the second, religious authority and learning. For centuries the family of Todros had been as a beacon of light to Israel, the very ark where religious traditions were preserved in primitive purity.

Was this so in reality?

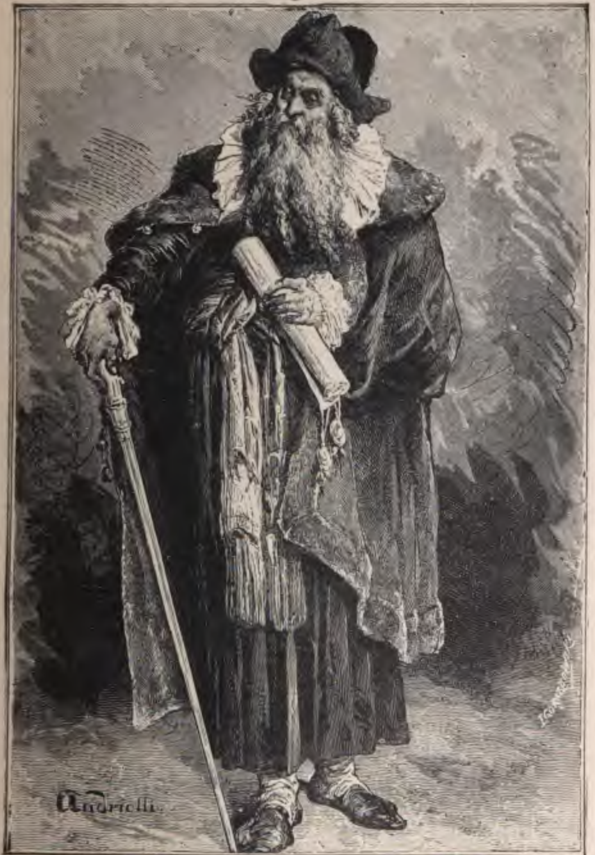
Some of the learned Talmudists smiled dubiously and spoke in a sad undertone when the learning of the Todros was mentioned, but the masses believed in them and came to Szybow from distant places in search of wisdom, spiritual, and bodily advice.

Szybow had not always possessed this shining light. Its first inhabitants and founders belonged to the sect of Karaites, the protestants of Israel. Driven out from the Chersonese, where they had ruled the country for several centuries, double outcasts from Palestine and the Crimea, they dispersed over the face of the earth, with nothing but the remembrance of past splendors and the Bible their only law. Invited by the Grand Duke of Lithuania in the fourteenth century, a few settled in his dominions and built the town of Szybow.

In those times there was a deadly quiet and darkness prevailing on Friday night, as the Karaites in opposition to the Talmudists did not usher in the Sabbath with glaring lights and feasting; but sat in darkness, meditating and mourning the downfall of the Temple and national greatness.

From the dark narrow windows, low wailings and plaintive melodies welled forth, in which the fathers told their children about the prophets on the rivers of Babylon who severed the fingers from their hands so as not to be forced to play and sing in captivity.

But a time came when here and there in the houses lights appeared, choral prayers, and sounds of feasting were heard. The Rabbinists had made their appearance in the town. Worshippers of the Talmud, and blind believers in the oral traditions, collected and transmitted by the Cohens, [illegible] and Gaons, it was not likely they



Michael Ezofovitch, Senior.—Page 7.

would live side by side with the heretic Karaites. The little community dissolved itself gradually, and finally disappeared under the last blow given by Michael Ezofovitch, Senior, a man well known in the annals of the Polish Israelites.

This was the first Ezofovitch whose name appears before the public, in the beginning of the sixteenth century. Under the influence of a high civilization, wise and just laws, he had become a staunch partisan of the nation who had given shelter and protection to his race.

Consequently King Sigismund I. gave him the title of Senior and authority over all the Jewish population in Lithuania and the adjacent provinces by royal decree.

"We, Sigismund, by the Grace of God, etc., give hereby to know that considering the faithful services of the Jew, Michael Ezofovitch, we nominate him Senior over all the Jews in our dominions; to attend to their affairs, so that there should be no delay or hindrance to rule them according to their laws, and punish offenders with our consent and according to justice."

Judging from history, the Senior must have been a man of strong character and mental capacities far beyond his time. He ruled with a strong hand, and those that would not submit he expelled, as for instance the Karaites, whom he deprived of all rights of fellowship. Under this blow, the existence of the Karaites, precarious and lingering already, was doomed to a speedy end.

Poor, persecuted, yet tenaciously holding to their faith, the descendants of the Kharson rulers left the town, all but a few families who clung to the spot where their fathers had lived and died. The Rabbinists took possession of the town, destroyed the heretic temple, and, through their indomitable energy and mutual co-operation, changed the sad little town into a place full of motion, bustle, and wealth.

Throughout the kingdom the Israelites were greatly prosperous under the rule of the Senior. Besides material well-being, there began to dawn a new era of civilization, which promised to raise them from the depths of ignorance and social degradation.

Great indeed must have been the sagacity of the Senior, that, in midst of superstitions accumulated for centuries, he recognized the spirit of the time and the wants of his people. It was not fanaticism so much which made him banish the Karaites as a social and administrative necessity ; though as a Rabbinist he was bound to recognize religious authorities, but even as to these grave doubts assailed his spirit.

In one of his petitions to the king, in which he defends himself from charges brought against him by his enemies, he writes sadly, almost ironically :

"Our books are often contradictory ; often we do not know how to act, as Eliezer says go this way, and Gamaliel, go the other. There is one truth in Jerusalem, another in Babylon (two editions of the Talmud which contradict each other). We listen to the second Moses (Maimonides) and others call him a heretic. I encourage learned men to write wise books fit for the understanding of the intelligent and the simple minds."

At the same period great controversies waged amongst the Jews of France and Spain as to whether worldly knowledge was admissible for the true believer of the Talmud and Bible. Opinions were for and against it; but the partisans who were for excluding the Jews from all worldly knowledge were by far the most powerful.

"Beware of Greek wisdom," exclaimed Joseph Esobi to his son, "it is like the vineyards of Sodoma, full of drunkenness and sin. Then all the Rabbis and Elders issued a command prohibiting worldly knowledge to all under thirty years of age."

"Rabbi," said some of the bolder spirits, "how can we acquire knowledge at an age when the spirit becomes faint and memory and energy are on the wane?"

Nevertheless the law remained in force. The intellect became blunted, and youthful aspirations were crushed in the bud. Then a great wave of darkness came over the people. The times had gone by when their nation produced great and wise men, beloved by the people and honored by kings. Past and forgotten, the lofty doctrines of Maimonides, who tried to establish the truth of the Bible and the Talmud upon mathematical and astronomical foundations, and expressed a desire to compress the voluminous Talmud into one chapter, provided it were made clear to every understanding; who did not encourage blind submission to religious doctrines, and said that eyes were given to mankind to see before them, but not behind, and that there would be a time when the world would be as full of knowledge as the sea is full of water.

The tomb of Maimonides was silent, but not unforgotten amidst the increasing darkness. His memory was cursed, and fanatical hands tore down the inscription full of gratitude and praise and substituted the dry and cruel sentence,

"Here lies Moses Maimonides, accursed heretic."

Dissertations like those among the Western Jews also took place in Poland, though, living under a mild and just government, the Jews did not manifest the same passionate hatred towards foreign races. On the contrary, a great many called out for wider knowledge and a brotherly share in the progress of the nation. At the head of this party was Michael Ezofovitch, the Lithuanian Senior. Mainly through his influence, the Jewish Synod issued the following proclamation:

"Jehovah has many Sephiroth, and Adam many emanations of equal perfection. The Israelite must not rest satisfied with one knowledge (the religious). The apple of Paradise is the best, but that is no reason why they should not taste other fruit, though less perfect. Jews were at the courts of kings. Mardocheus was a sage; Esther, full of wisdom; Nehemias, a Persian councillor, and brought his people out of bondage. The Jews are like the stars in heaven and the sand of the sea; they do not shine like stars, but everybody crushes them underfoot like sand. The wind carries the seed of different plants; who asks whence comes the finest tree? why should not we produce the cedar of Lebanon instead of barren thistles."

The man under whose influence was written this proclamation awakening the Jews to a new life, met face to face with another man, whose eyes looked back into the past and darkness. This was Nehemias Todros, newly arrived from Spain—a descendant of Todros Abulafi Halevi,

—famous for his deep study of the Talmud, till his mind, altogether under the influence of cabalistic (occult) mysteries, he became the originator of one of the worst errors under which the spirit of a nation could labor. It is said that the same Nehemias Todros introduced the book of Zohar, with its pernicious doctrines, into Poland, and that the Cabala, mixed with the Talmud, exercised the worst influence upon the minds of the Polish Jews. History does remark upon the dissensions that took place at the introduction of the new doctrines amongst the people, who were just emerging to a brighter life; but tradition, carefully preserved amongst family annals, describes the desperate struggle between Michaël Ezofovitch, a Jew of Polish descent, and Nehemias Todros, the Spanish newcomer. The first succumbed. Torn by grief, at the sight of his people led astray and his own powerlessness, he died in the prime of his life. His name was carefully preserved in the family from generation to generation; they were proud of his position, though with the lapse of time they understood less and less its real importance. From that time forth the supremacy of the Todros became an established fact. Thenceforth, the house of Ezofovitch devoted itself entirely to the accumulation of wealth. The great rivers carried their ships, laden with the produce of the country, into foreign ports, and the mean little town became the centre of commercial enterprise. Proud of their success, they left off caring altogether for that power which Nehemias Todros had wrenched from their ancestor Michael.

The descendants of Todros continued to live in the little

hut near the synagogue; devoted entirely to sacred stud
they led a life of austere severity, barren of all comfort
life, and their learning, combined with ascetism, ten
to increase their influence over the masses far beyond
region of the town.

II.

It was toward the end of the last century. In Warsaw, the diet, called the Four Years' Diet, had assembled. News of their discussions reached the little Jewish town. The people opened their ears and listened eagerly, full of expectations. They are discussing the Jewish question.

What do they say about us? What do they write? Those were the questions bearded Jews, in long gaberdines, repeated to each other. The curiosity grew day by day to such an extent as to cause stagnation in business. Some even went so far as to risk the long and troublesome journey to Warsaw, so as to be nearer the source of events. Once arrived there, they sent long letters, old newspapers, and pamphlets to their brethren, which arrived battered and crushed from the long transit.

Amongst those who remained in town and listened for news most anxiously were two men; the Rabbi Nochim Todros, and Hersz Ezofovitch, the wealthy merchant. There was a silent antagonism and smouldering aversion between the descendant of Michael Senior, the disciple of Maimonides, and the descendant of the fanatical Nehemias Todros, which waited only for a chance to burst into flames.

One day, a little paper, crushed and soiled in the passage, arrived from Warsaw, and there were written the following words:—

"All difference of dress, language, and costume, which separates the Jews from the other inhabitants, to be abolished. Everything which concerns their religion to be respected. The different sects to be tolerated in so far as they do not act perniciously upon the morals. No Jew to be admitted to baptism before the twenty-first year of his age. Full permission for the Jews to acquire landed property; to those who wish to cultivate the soil, remission of taxes for four years, and a free gift of agricultural implements. Marriage prohibited to men under twenty, and to women under eighteen years of age."

This little paper was carried about the streets, read a hundred times, waved into the air like a flag of mourning or of joy, until, in those thousands of eager hands it dispersed into atoms.

The people of Szybow did not express their opinion about what they had read at once. One party, by far the smaller, looked with questioning eyes at Hersz Ezofovitch, the majority scanned the face of Rabbi Nochim Todros. Rabbi Nochim crossed the threshold of his dwelling, raised his lean arms high above his gray locks and called out,—

"Assybe! assybe! daïde!"

"Distress! distress! woe!" repeated the crowd assembled in the precincts, after him.

Hersz Ezofovitch stood erect at the door of the synagogue, with one hand upon the sash of his satin garments caressing his beard with the other. He raised his head proudly, and in deep thrilling tones exclaimed:

"Hope! hope! joy!"

"Hope! hope! joy!" repeated the party of his adherents in a less assured voice, casting sidelong glances at the rabbi.

The old man had keen ears; he heard; his white beard trembled and his eyes flashed fire.

"They want to shave our beards and make us wear modern abominations," he called out wrathfully.

"It will make our intelligence all the longer and widen our hearts and brains," said the clear voice from the steps of the Temple.

"They will harness us to the plough, and force us to till the soil of bondage," shouted Reb Nochim.

"They will open the treasures of the earth for us, and bid us cultivate the land as our own," said Hersz.

"They will not allow us to eat the food according to our laws and will make Israel a barren waste. The faces of your sons will be covered with hair long before they have wives of their own."

"When they get their wives their brains and limbs will be all the stronger."

"Our sons will be compelled to learn wisdom from the Edomite and drink from the vineyards of Sodoma."

"It brings nearer to us the great day (Jobel-ha-Gadel) when the lamb will lie down with the lion."

"Hersz Ezofovitch! Hersz Ezofovitch! out of your mouth speaks your ancestor Michael, who wanted to lead Israel into alien bonds."

"Reb Nochim! Reb Nochim. Your eyes reflect the soul of your forefather who brought the night of darkness upon the children of Israel."

Thus in the midst of a dense, silent crowd stood those two against each other. Nochim's voice became more strident and cutting, and his yellow face was marked with two red spots. The voice of Hersz was deep and thrilling and his face very pale. Whilst the rabbi swayed his body in convulsive motions, the merchant stood erect and quiet, his white hand still resting upon the sash of his garments, but his whole soul seemed concentrated in his gleaming eyes.

Several thousand eyes wandered from the face of one champion to the other, all the lips quivered, but there was no sound.

Again the strident tones of Reb Nochim's voice pierced the air:

"Assybe, assybe, daige. It sounded almost like a sob of anguish from the depth of his heart.

"Hope! hope! joy!" shouted the ringing voice of Hersz.

The crowd still remained silent; presently their heads began to move almost simultaneously, and a murmur like the gentle rushing of water made itself heard; it gradually increased and grew louder, till suddenly many thousand hands were raised as if in pain or terror, and thousands of throats wailed forth:

"Assybe, assybe, daige!" (Woe! woe! distress!)

Reb Nochim Todros had won the day.

Hersz looked slowly around. His partisans stood near him still, but silent, with bent heads and scared faces. Hersz smiled scornfully. The crowd still wailing streamed into the synagogue with Reb Nochim at their head, who in a loud voice intoned the prayer in time of danger and sudden calamity. When the brown walls resounded with the sobbing voices:

"Lord, save thy people, save from destruction the faithful children of Israel." The young merchant slowly descended the steps, crossed the market-place and disappeared in one of the largest houses. Hersz had built it for himself recently; it looked clean and new. Hersz sank down upon the nearest stool and buried his face in his hands. He sat lost in thought for a long while, then straightened himself and called out:

"Freida! Freida!".

The door of the next room opened almost instantly, and on the threshold stood a tall, slender woman in a snow-white turban and long white apron, that fell in soft folds from her neck to the bottom of her gown. The bright flames of the hearth played fitfully around her and reflected in the rows of pearls around her throat. There was a glad light in her large black eyes as she stood opposite her husband questioning him only by the expression of her face.

"Freida!" he began, "have you heard what has been going on in town?"

"Yes, I heard," she said in a gentle voice; "my brother José came in and told me you had a bitter quarrel with Reb Nochim."

"He wants to crush me as he crushed my forefather."

Freida's eyes grew suddenly larger with fear.

"Hersz!" she exclaimed, "do not quarrel with him; he is a great man, a holy man, and the people will be with him."

"Have no fear," said the husband, smiling, "he can do me no harm. Times have changed. I cannot help speaking out when the heart is full and look on indifferently whilst the silly crowd shouts after him; but they cannot help it, nobody ever taught them the difference between right and wrong, the past and the future."

After a short silence, Hersz began again:

"Freida!"

"Yes, Hersz."

"You have not forgotten what I told you about Michael Senior?"

"How should I forget? It was a beautiful tale!"

"He was a great, very great, man, but Todros killed him. Had he lived he would have done great things for the Jews. I will ask him what he wanted to do; he will teach me, and I shall do it."

Freida's face looked scared and pale.

"How can you ask him? He died long ago."

A mysterious smile played upon the Israelite's sensitive mouth.

"I know how; sometimes the Lord lets those speak who died long ago; they can speak and teach their grandsons. Freida," he said after a while, "do you know what Michael Senior did when he fell powerless and knew he would die before better times arrived?"

"No; what did he do?"

"He shut himself up in his room, alone, without food, drink, or sleep, and wrote night and day. What did he write? Nobody knows, because he concealed his writings carefully, and when he knew his end to be near he called his sons and said to them:

"I have written down all I knew and felt and thought of doing; but the papers are hidden, because the time has not come to make use of them. The reign of the Todros will last a long time, and their influence will be so strong that, if either you or your children found the writings, they would anathematize Michael Senior as a kafrim (heretic) and curse him as they did the second Moses. But a time will come when a descendant of mine will want the writings to show him the way of delivering his people out of the bondage of ignorance and bring them into the light of the sun which shines for other nations. This descendant of mine will find what he wants in my writings, and you, my sons, tell your children on your dying bed about the papers. This is my will. Remember, and listen to him whose soul has striven and worked for immortality." (One of the doctrines of Moses Maimonides was that the soul works out its own immortality by striving after the highest good. The punishment for a bad life was to be annihilation.)

Hersz had finished. Freida sat motionless, her eyes fixed wonderingly upon her husband.

"And will you search for those papers?" she whispered.

"I will search for them," repeated the husband, "for I am the descendant of whom Michael Senior spoke. I will find those papers, and you, Freida, shall help me."

The woman drew herself up, radiant with happiness.

"You are good, Hersz," she exclaimed out of the fulness of her heart, "to let me, a woman, share in your great thoughts and undertakings."

"And why should you not share in them? Do you not guard my house well and bring up my children righteously? You do everything well, Freida, and your soul is as beautiful as your eyes."

A deep blush spread over the woman's face, her eyes dropped, and a soft murmur, either of love or gratitude, passed her lips.

Hersz rose.

"Where shall we look for the papers?" he said, musingly.

"Where?" echoed the woman.

"Freida," said the husband, "Michael Senior would not have hidden them in the earth; he would know that worms and dampness must destroy them. Do you think they are buried?"

"No," said the woman, "they cannot be buried."

"He would not hide them in the walls, since walls do not last forever, but are pulled down or restored. I have built these myself, and nothing was found in the old ones. They could not be in the roof, as it is often renewed. When I was born in the old house it had had a new roof put on, and nothing was found there."

"Where can they be?" whispered Freida.

Both remained silent, thinking deeply. Suddenly Freida exclaimed:

"Hersz, I know; the papers are there," and with her forefinger she pointed to a glazed bookcase full of old volumes which occupied one corner of the room.

"There?" asked Hersz, with doubtful voice.

"There," firmly repeated the wife. "Did you not tell me that those books belonged to Michael Senior, and that they are kept as a relic, and which nobody ever touches, as Rabbi Todros forbids reading such books."

Hersz passed his hand over his brow, and the wife continued:

"Michael Senior was a wise man and read the future. He knew the books would be safe; nobody would search for the papers there but that descendant who was in need of them."

"Freida! Freida!" exclaimed Hersz, "you are a wise woman."

The black eyes again veiled themselves modestly.

"Hersz, I will go now to the children and rock the baby, who is crying, to sleep. I will give out the work for the servants and make them rake out the fire, then I shall come and help you at your work."

"Yes, come," said Hersz, and when the wife had crossed the door into the room, whence children's voices were audible, he looked after her and murmured softly,—

"Who can find a virtuous woman, for her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her."

After a short time she came back, bolted the door, and asked in a whisper,—

"Where is the key?"

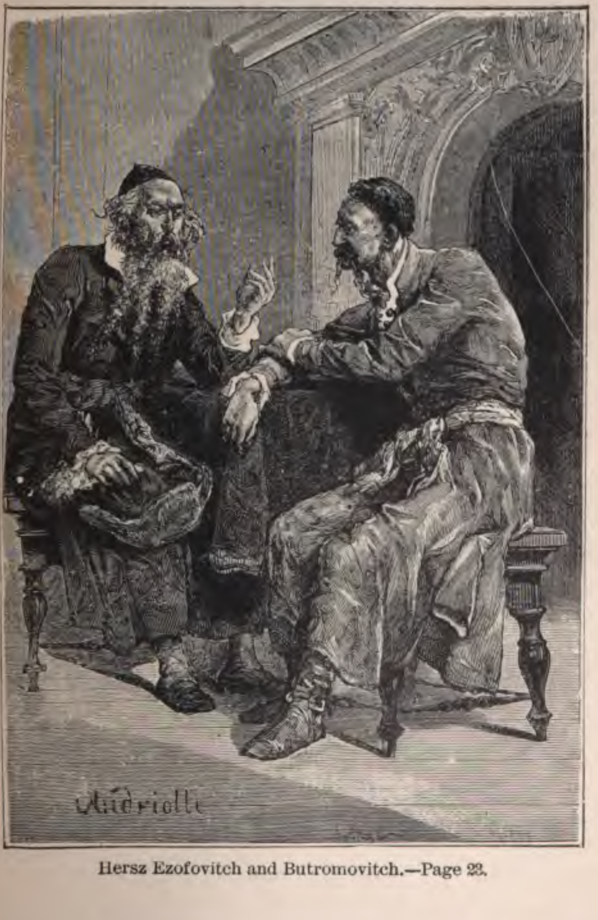
Hersz found the key, opened the old bookcase, and then both began lifting down the heavy volumes and piled them upon the floor. One by one they turned the yellow, age-stained pages which had not been touched for two hundred years. The dust rose in clouds and settled on Freida's white turban and Hersz's golden hair. Both worked unremittingly. The expression of their faces was solemn as if about to open the tomb of their ancestor to search for the thoughts buried with him.

The day was already on the wane, when a shout burst from Hersz's lips, a shout that proclaims victory.

Freida said nothing, but raised her folded hands in silent thanksgiving.

Afterwards Hersz remained a long time at the window, looking towards the sky, where the stars appeared one by one, and prayed long and earnestly. The light remained burning all the night, and with his head resting on both arms, Hersz was intent upon a voluminous yellow manuscript. When the first light began to dawn in the east, he stood ready equipped for a journey in the porch of his house. He was so absorbed that he saw neither his children nor his servants, only nodded to Freida, who stood at the open door, jumped into a cart full of straw, and drove away. Freida's eyes, mournful and proud at the same time, followed the departing husband.

"Where did Hersz go?" He went beyond hills, forests, rivers—far, far away, where, in the midst of the forests and bogs of Pink, lived the champion of Jewish emancipation, the deputy Butrymovitch, a nobleman of ancient lineage, and a thinker. He was one of those who saw far and clear into the future, grasped the situation and the importance of strong and close alliances and wise laws.



Hersz Ezofovitch and Butromovitch.—Page 23.

When Hersz was ushered into the nobleman's house and stood face to face with the great deputy, he bowed very low and began slowly and earnestly,—

"I am Hersz Ezofovitch, a merchant from Szybow, and descendant of Michael Ezofovitch, who was Elder over the Jewish nation, called Senior by the order of the king. I have come from a far-away country. And why did I come? I came to see the great deputy, to speak with the great writer, whose words fell upon my eyes as the rays of the sun. The light, though dazzling, did not blind my eyes; but like the plant which climbs round the mighty oak, my thoughts climbed up and twined around your great thoughts, so that both should grow and spread over the world and there should be no more dissensions and no more darkness."

The deputy replied in a few courteous words.

Hersz went on.

"The illustrious deputy said there was to be everlasting peace between the two nations, who, of the same country, yet do not hold to each other?"

"Yes, I said it," affirmed the deputy.

"The illustrious Pan said if the Jew had the same rights as the Christian in everything, he would do no harm any more?"

"Yes, I said it."

"The illustrious Pan also said if the Jew became a Polish citizen he would have to send his children to national schools, abolish certain customs and superstitions that are neither good nor useful, and that he would have the right to acquire landed property?"

"Yes, I said all that."

Presently the tall Jew with the proud forehead and intelligent eye bent down suddenly, and before the deputy had time to see or to prevent it, touched his hand with his lips.

"I am a stranger," he said softly, "a guest in this country—a younger brother."

Then he straightened himself, and putting his hand into his satin garment, drew forth a roll of yellow papers.

"I brought that to you which is more precious to me than gold or precious stones."

"What is it?" asked the deputy.

"It is the last will of my ancestor, Michael Ezofovitch."

During the whole night, by the light of burning wax-candles, sat these two and read. When they left off reading they talked, with heads close together, their faces glowing.

When the day began to dawn, both rose from their seats and their hands met in a silent, vigorous grasp. What they read and what they spoke about, what feelings of hope and enthusiasm were sealed with that silent grasp, nobody ever knew. They were buried in darkness with other historical mysteries, together with our brightest hopes and aspirations. Misfortune has driven them there, they are hidden but not lost.

The next morning a carriage drawn by six horses stood before the nobleman's house. The deputy and his guest, the Israelite, mounted and drove toward the capital.

After several months, Hersz returned from Warsaw to his native town. He was busy, very busy, there; he talked, explained, retailed news, brought partisans over to his side, and prepared the people for great changes. Then he went away again and came back. This lasted for several years.

One day Hersz came back from his travels, changed almost beyond recognition ; the proud forehead furrowed with grief or care, the eyes sunken and lustreless. He entered his house and threw himself down sighing. Freida stood before him, sadly disturbed, but quietly waiting, waiting until her husband should speak. At last he raised his dim eyes to her, and said,—

"Everything is lost !"

"Why lost ?" murmured Freida.

Hersz spread out his hands to indicate something great was lost.

"If a building breaks asunder, beams fall upon the heads of the lookers on and dust blinds their eyes. A great building is gone to pieces, and the spars and beams are falling and crushing our hopes and our work, and the dust has covered them for a long time. We must hide the writings of the Senior again, Freida, they are of no use now ; perhaps a great grandson will look for them when the time comes for better things."

From that day forth Hersz begun suddenly to grow old. He sat for hours on the bench, swaying his body to and fro, sighing and repeating,—

"Assybe ! assybe ! daïde !" (Woe ! woe ! misfortune !)

For ever near the sad man was the slender woman in the white turban ; the black eyes were often full of tears, and her step so gentle that not even the pearl round her throat rustled and betrayed her presence. His sadness saddened but also puzzled her. What ailed him? His children were well and hearty, his wealth had not diminished, everything was as it had been the day before he quarreled with Reb Nochim. The good and loving wife whose whole world was within her four walls, could not understand that the spirit of her husband had been carried off into the world of great ideas, and that when driven out from his Eden by the force of inimical circumstances, he could not get the better of his sorrow and the yearning after it. She did not know that in this world there are other losses to be wept over than the mere loss of earthly possessions; and human sorrows for which time even has no balm.

Around the black hut of Nochim Todros, shouts of joy resounded.

"Joy! joy! joy!" shouted the old rabbi, after he had heard that everything was lost; that those who wanted to change their laws had no longer the power to enforce their ideas.

"Joy! joy! joy! Safe are our beards and long gaberdines; safe the Cabala, herem and koscher meats; safe the holy books of Mischna, Gemara, and Zohar from Edomite contamination; no tilling of the soil for the chosen people; Israel is saved from destruction."

Todros rejoiced, and called upon all who believed in his wisdom and sanctity to rejoice with him.

He had triumphed over Hersz, but that was not sufficient. The axe must be laid to the very root of the tree which at some time or other might bring forth fresh branches and *destroy the holy* work of Todros.

As accusations were brought against Michael Senior centuries ago, so they were brought now against his descendant. He was publicly denounced in the synagogue as a Sabbath-breaker, a friend of the Edomite ; accused of eating unclean meat and seeking justice at alien courts in preference to submitting to their own laws ; of disrespect to the elders of the Cabala, and want of reverence to Reb Nochim Todros.

Hersz defended himself proudly, denied some of the accusations, admitted others, justifying himself upon grounds which neither the people nor the elders would acknowledge.

This lasted a long time ; but gradually the persecutions grew less and almost died away, for their victim retired from public life altogether. He shut himself up into his own house, and only devoted himself to business, which did not prosper either, as he did not possess any longer the confidence and sympathy of his brethren. What he suffered and endured in these last years of his life, nobody knows, as he did not make confidences. Before his death he spoke long and trustingly to Freida. The children were too young to be intrusted with the secret of his life, his broken hopes, and hidden sorrows. He left his message for them with his wife. But did Freida understand the words of her dying husband ? was she capable and willing to repeat them to the children ? who knows ? This only is certain, she was the only recipient of his secret and alone knew about Michael Senior's legacy, not only to his children, but to the people of Israel, far more valuable than all the treasures in their strong boxes and warehouses.

After the death of Hersz there remained nobody in the town who had any thoughts beyond his own family or the accumulation of riches. Their religion was a dark, unreasoning fanaticism, blind obedience to the letter whence the spirit had fled, and a suspicious reserve against everything which came from the broad, enlightened, but to them alien, world.

PART I.

CHAPTER I.

It was three years ago.

A wet mist hung over the muddy streets of the little town, obscuring the evening sky. The fresh March wind, full of the scent of newly ploughed fields, which swept the streets, was powerless against the heavy vapors and stifling air which clung in volumes round the doors and windows of the houses.

The town, in spite of mist and smells, seemed gay and festive. All the windows shone with lights, and sounds of loud conversation and choral prayers were audible. Any passer-by would see through the windows bright family groups. Women in festive caps and dresses were carrying dishes, arranging the table, and surveying the whole with pleased countenances. Bearded men were carrying little children in their arms, caressing their dimpled cheeks or throwing them up to the ceiling, to the joy of old and young. Others sat on benches along the wall, conversing ; some, again, covered with the soft white draperies of their tallith (stall), stood turned to the wall to prepare in prayer for the hour of Sabbath.

For it was Friday evening.

There was only one place in the town where darkness reigned, darkness and dead silence. It was a small gray hut, almost sunk into the ground, nestling against a hill which was the only bit of uneven ground in the midst of a vast plain. It was not nature's work either. Tradition said it had been raised by the hands of the Karaites to build their Temple upon. There is no trace now of the heretic Temple, and the hill serves only as a shelter from wind and snow to the little hut at its side. A wild pear-tree grows on the incline of the hill, and the wind sighs gently in the bare branches.

Long stretches of ploughed fields lie between the hut and the town, whence the wind brings along the sounds, and long streaks of vapor which crawl in the newly ploughed furrows. Two small windows made of bits of irregular glass give light to the hut in the daytime ; now, everything is dark ; but from the depth of the darkness within comes the quavering voice of an old man,—

"Beyond the far seas, beyond towering mountains," said the voice in the darkness, "flows the river Sabbathion. It flows not with water, or milk, or honey, but with yellow gravel and great stones."

The tremulous voice stopped, and amidst the silence another voice, a girlish or childish one, resounded,—

"Zeide ! (grandfather) go on."

"Do you hear any one coming ?" asked the zeide.

"No, I do not hear anything," answered the young voice.

Presently the quavering voice resumed,—

"Across the holy river Sabbathion live the four tribes of Israel: Gad, Assur, Dan, and Naphtali. These tribes fled from terror and great oppression, and Jehovah, blessed be his holy name, hid them from their enemies on the other side of the river that flows with yellow gravel and great stones. And the gravel rises like the waves of the ocean, and the stones roar like the hurricane in a mighty forest. And when the day of the Sabbath approaches——"

The quavering voice stopped again and whispered,—

"Are they coming?"

For a little while there was no answer, it seemed as if the other invisible being within was listening intently.

"Yes, they are coming," she said at last.

From the dark interior a hollow moan was audible.

"Zeide, go on," said the same girlish voice, but more determined.

But her zeide remained silent.

From the direction of the town a strange noise approached and grew louder and louder every minute. It came from the throats of some fifty boys, who looked like so many black dots upon the dusky landscape. Presently, with yells of laughter and derision, they surrounded the hut, rattled at the door and windows so that the little tenement shook on its foundations.

They were children, boys of different ages. Their dress was scarcely visible in the darkness, but from under their little caps, their hair fluttered in the wind and their eyes sparkled with excitement and maybe fanaticism.

"Good evening, Karaim!" they shouted with one voice, hands and feet hammering at door and window.

"Why do you not burn lights on the holy Sabbath? Why do you sit like the devil, in darkness? heretic! blasphemer," shouted the elder boys.

"Aleidyk! madman! wretch! beggar," shouted lustily the little ones.

The abusive laughter and rattling became louder and louder, but above the noise rose the clear, resonant voice,—

"Zeide! go on with the story."

"Ai! ai! ai!" moaned the trembling voice, "how can I speak whilst they shout and shout and abuse?"

"Zeide! go on with the story."

The girl's voice sounded stern, almost commanding; there was pain and scorn in it, and an evident effort to make it steady.

Like a sad melody amidst the raging elements rose the tremulous tones of the old man.—

"When the holy Sabbath comes near, Jehovah, blessed be his name, bids the river to rest. The gravel does not rise in high waves and the stones do not roar like the hurricane in the forest; but there rises instead a dense mist, which hides from their ememies the four tribes of Israel: Gad, Assur, Dan, and Naphtali."

Alas! near the little gray hut no river Sabbathion was flowing, to screen it with its waves, nor was there any mist to render it invisible to its foes.

The foes were small, but numerous.

With a last effort of mischievous malice, the stronger ones had managed to wrench the window assunder and the small panes fell clinking on the ground. A shout of triumph proclaimed their victory. Presently bits of soil and small stones came flying in. The quavering voice sounded hoarser and further off,—

"Ai! ai! ai! Jehovah!"

"Ziede, hush! Zeide, do not cry out; Zeide, have no fear!"

Suddenly, amidst the tumult of the small savages who clung to door and windows, a commanding voice called out,—

"Quiet, boys! what are you doing here? off with you at once."

There was a sudden hush, and the children scurried back, and huddled close together.

The man, whose resonant voice had caused the hush was tall and graceful, dressed in a long coat trimmed with costly fur. His face looked pale in the dusk, but the eyes had the brilliancy of a young man.

"What are you doing here?" he repeated in the same angry voice. "Are there wolves in that dwelling, that you shout and yell around it?"

The boys remained silent and pressed closely together. Presently one of them, the tallest and boldest, snarled,—

"And why do they not light their candles on the Sabbath?"

"What is that to you, pray?" asked the young man.

"It is nothing to you either!" retorted the bold youth, "we come here every week and do the same; it's no concern of yours."

"I know you come every week, and that's why I watched in order to catch you in the act, and now off with you."

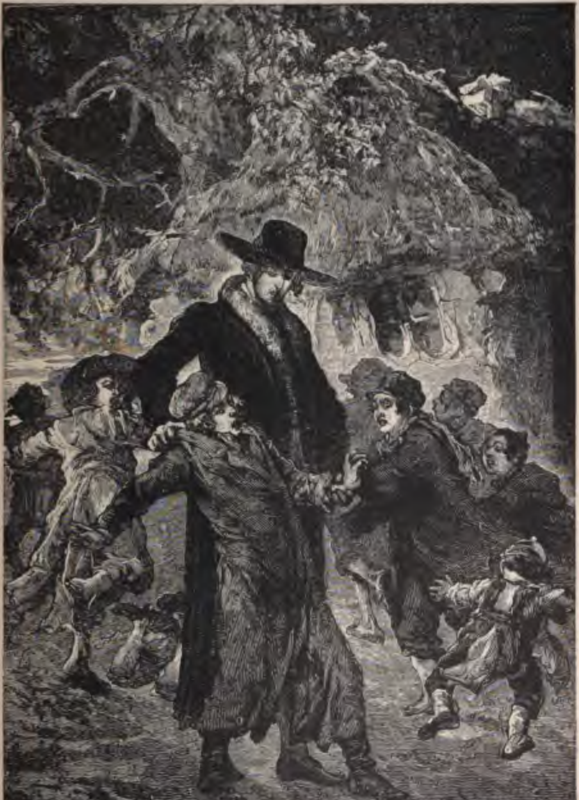
"Go home yourself, Meir; your Bobe (great-grandmother), and Zeide have begun supper without you; why drive us away, when you do not observe the Sabbath yourself?"

The eyes of the young man flared with anger, he stamped his foot and shouted to the children, who scattered in all directions—all but the oldest boy, who, in spite of anger and remonstrances, still went on throwing bits of soil through the window. But a powerful hand grasped him. "Come!" said the young man. "I shall take you home myself!" The boy yelled and wriggled, but the hand held him like a vice and a quiet voice bade him stop that noise. The boy hung his head and submitted sulkily. It was now very quiet about the cottage, nothing interrupted the stillness but the hoarse, deep sighs from the dark interior, and from the shattered window sounded the gentle voice of the girl,—

"Thank you."

"Peace be with you," answered the young man, and passed on, carrying with him the youthful offender. They crossed the fields and several streets in silence, and entered into one of the houses on the market-place.

It was a long, low building with a covered yard, and the wide entrance showed at once that it was an inn. The row of windows belonging to the guest's room were in darkness. Those on the other side of the house glimmered with the Sabbath lights. Heaps of litter and refuse reached almost up to the low window sills. The inn was the property of Jankeil Kamionker, a man of high standing in the Cahala (congregation), and much respected in the



"I shall take you home myself."—Page 34.

community, for his great learning, piety, and not less for the clever management of his business. The young man leading the boy, who did not seem to mind it at all, picked his steps carefully over the heaps of litter in the darkness, crossed the entrance, ascended some rickety steps, opened a door and pushed the culprit inside. Having done this he did not go away at once, but putting his head into the half-opened door he called out, "Reb Jankeil, I brought home your son Mendel; punish him with a fatherly hand. He roams about in the dark, and assaults innocent people."

There was no answer, but from the interior of the room came the continual murmur of a man engaged in prayer. A large room was visible, with dirty walls and a big stove black with dust and soot. There was a table covered with a linen cloth of doubtful cleanliness. The Sabbath feast had not begun, but the seven candles were lit already, and sounds of clattering dishes and children's voices sounded from a distance. There was nobody in the room but a middle-sized man of thin and flexible limbs. To say he stood against the wall would be scarcely appropriate, as he did not stand, but swayed in continual motion. He threw his body backwards and forwards so that the soft drapery of his tallith flapped about like huge wings, and the philacterin on head and wrist danced about, and the red beard whipped his face and shoulders. These violent jerks were accompanied by a low murmur, which grew louder and louder till it rose sometimes to a shriek or ended with a wail or a song.

The young man standing at the door looked at the figure praying with all his soul, or rather, body, for a long time. He evidently waited for a pause. But it was generally known that whoso waited for the end of Reb Jankiel's prayers had to wait very long. The young man was not very patient, or perhaps felt too indignant with young Mendel's offence.

"Reb Jankiel," he called out, after a while, "your son roams about at night and attacks innocent people."

No answer.

"Reb Jankiel, your son insults poor people with opprobrious words."

Reb Jankiel went on praying with unabated fervor.

"Reb Jankiel, your son breaks poor people's poor little windows at night."

Reb Jankiel turned over the leaves of the book he was holding, and in a triumphant, half-singing, half-reciting, voice broke forth,—

"Praise ye the Lord. Sing unto the Lord a new song and his praise in the congregation of saints."

Upon this the door was shut, and the young man swiftly descended the steps and carefully threaded his way along the heaps of rubbish. When he arrived at the last of the lighted windows, he paused for a minute and listened to some one singing within. It was a young man's voice, full of sadness, but exquisitely clear and flexible.

"Eliezer!" he called out softly.

The window was the cleanest in the whole house, and revealed the interior of a tiny room with no other furniture than a narrow bed, a table, chair, and a bookcase full of books. A young man of about twenty, with a pale and refined face, was standing near the table lit up by a single tallow-candle. The only touch of color in the pallid face were the red lips, slightly opened, whence issued the sweet sounds which would cast a spell and arrest the steps of any passer-by. No wonder that, with such a voice, Eliezer, the son of Jankiel, was the cantor of the community, the singer of the people before Jehovah.

"Eliezer!" repeated the voice under the window entreatingly. The singer must have heard it, for he raised his sad, dreamy eyes, and looked towards its direction, but he did not interrupt his song. On the contrary, raising both his hands in rapt fervor, his voice became more voluminous.

"Why standest Thou afar off, O Lord. Thy people are brought even to the gates of death!

"Save us, O Jehovah!"

The young man under the window did not call out again to the singer who prayed for his people, but walked softly away in the direction of a house whose windows were brilliantly lighted. He paused a minute before entering the house, looked through the mist at the few visible stars; lost in dreamy thoughts, he sang softly after his friend Eliezer,—

"Save us, oh save us, Jehovah!"

CHAPTER II.

THE great, brilliantly lighted house which stood opposite the synagogue, separated from it by the whole width of the square, was the same which Hersz had built for himself and his beautiful wife Freida. Nearly a hundred years of rain and dust had stained and blackened the walls, but it was still the most prominent house in the town. An hour ago the large table had been prepared, and already the ceremonies of meeting the holy day of Sabbath had begun. Amongst the large gathering of some forty people rose the head of the house, Saul Ezofovitch, the son of Hersz, who approached the table, above which hung two seven-branched chandeliers of massive silver. The old man, whose slightly bent, but still powerful figure and snow-white beard pointed to his age of fourscore and some years, took the hand of his eldest son, also a grayhaired man, and with the other raised a long staff with a lighted taper at the end towards the chandeliers, and in a sonorous voice called out,—

"Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee!"

Scarcely had he finished when all the lights blazed forth, and from all the throats burst the cry,—

"Arise, shine, for thy light is come,

"Shake thyself from the dust. Put on thy beautiful garments to meet the holy day of Sabbath."

Long murmurs of prayer and songs followed one upon another, and re-echoed in the dark and empty square.

The young man outside heard it and hastened his steps.

He crossed the porch, entered the long passage which divided the house in two and approached the door, whence long streaks of light issued and a noisy conversation had already taken the place of prayers and singing.

The gathering consisted of a great variety of people and faces. The two sons of Saul, Abram and Rafael, men both well on in years, with gray beards and earnest faces, Saul's son-in-law, Ber, light-haired, pale, and languid of expression ; daughters, daughters-in-law and granddaughters ; women with full figures, carefully arranged wigs and high caps ; young girls with long, shining tresses and eyes full of life and brightness ; some young men related to the family, and children of all ages and sizes, all these sat around the festive table. At the head of the table sat old Saul and looked at the door leading to the further rooms with an air of expectancy. Presently the door opened and two women appeared ; one of them was perfectly dazzling with splendor. She was an old, very old woman, but still erect and strong-looking. She wore a bright-colored turban upon her head, fastened in front with a diamond brooch. A necklace of pearls nestled on the withered throat and descended upon the soft draperies of a white apron which covered the rich brocade dress. Long pendants with diamonds too heavy for the ears were fastened and held back with strings, to the turban ; she wore a profusion of rubies, emeralds, and diamonds everywhere about her, which threw out a dazzling light. Only at Eastern courts such a display of costly jewels would be met with, or upon the shrines of holy relics. This Israelitish centenarian was decked out in all the richest things the house possessed; she was evidently, for those assembled people, the holy shrine which they honored. Led by one of her great-granddaughters, a pretty girl with dark complexion and raven hair, she stood in the door and looked slowly around the room. All the faces were smiling, and there was a general murmur,—

"Bobe! Elte Bobe!" (grandmother! great-grand mother!)

The far greater number murmured the last name; there was only one, the head of the family who said softly,—

"Mame!" Mother!

Very sweet that name sounded from Saul's withered lips and the wrinkled brow, covered with a black, velvet cap, seemed to smooth itself out and grow younger.

What had become of the lithe figure and brilliant eyes of Freida, the quiet, industrious, and wise helpmate of Hersz Ezofovitch? All that was gone, gone long ago as was also her lord and husband. Her once slender proportions had broadened out like a mighty stem which has produced many strong and fruitful branches. Her face was a perfect network of wrinkles, and her eyes looked small and faded from under the heavy, yellow eyelids. But upon that face touched and effaced by the hand of time there rested an expression of peace and perfect happiness. The thin lips which smiled upon the gathering opened now but very rarely to utter even the shortest sentence.

Her arms, covered with full white sleeves, rested upon the shoulder of the young girl; her eyes, shrinking from the glare of light, travelled slowly along the table, and at last in a loud whisper she asked,—

"Where is Meir?"

The great-grandmother had spoken.

All the heads moved, like trees in a sudden breeze.

Men and women turned to each other and the whisper went round,—

"Where is Meir?"

Amongst so many, the non-appearance of one had passed unnoticed.

Old Saul did not repeat the question, but the furrows on his forehead deepened, the eyes grew sterner and with anger in his face he looked at the entrance door.

It opened presently and a young man of slender build, dressed in a long, tight-fitting coat trimmed with fur, entered, shut the door behind him, and stood a few seconds irresolutely, as if shy or ashamed. He perceived himself late; prayers were over and his grandfather Saul, his two uncles and some of the elder women were looking at him with questioning and displeased eyes.

Only the faded eyes of the great-grandmother did not show either anger or displeasure. On the contrary, they seemed to open wider, and there was a joyful light in them. The heavy eyelids trembled, the thin lips parted, and as before she said, in a tuneless whisper,—

"Einklchen! Kleiniskind! (Grandson! little child!)"

At the sound of the voice, full of tenderness and pleasure, Saul who was just opening his mouth to question and rebuke his grandson bent his head, so did his uncles. The late comer was received in silence, interrupted only by the great-grandmother who repeated,—

"Kleiniskind!"

Saul spread his hands over the table.

"Blessed be the Lord," he began.

"Blessed be the Lord," spread the murmur, and all stood up for a few minutes to pronounce the blessing over meat and drink.

The young man did not join the family circle, but retired to the depth of the room to say the prescribed prayers for the Sabbath. He did not indulge in any violent jerks, as customary with most of his people, but remained perfectly motionless, his hands crossed upon his breast, and his eyes fixed upon the window and the dark night beyond.

He had a gentle, oval face, pale with the pallor of a passionate nervous organization. His fair hair with a golden sheen upon it, fell upon his forehead from under which a pair of gray, deepset eyes betrayed a feverish restlessness. The thin sensitive lips had a very tender expression. A thick golden down adorned his upper lip, and showed his age to be about twenty, therefore, reaching that stage of life in which, according to the law, he was obliged to become head of a family himself and look after his own affairs. When the young man had finished his prayers, and approached the table to take his usual place, a hoarse voice from amidst the assembly called out,—

"Where have you been all this time, Meir? What were you doing in town, when the Sabbath had begun and nobody ought to be doing anything? Why were you not present at prayers, and why are your eyes sad and your face pale on a Sabbath when everybody in heaven and upon earth are rejoicing?"

The man who uttered this speech in a hoarse, drawling voice was very singular looking. His head, far too big for his thin and dried-up body, was covered with a mass of matted hair, which, like his long beard, had scarcely ever known the comb. Still more singular was his dress, which consisted of a long shirt of rough sackcloth which fell upon his bare feet and was tied across the waist with a hempen rope.

Who was the man in the garb of an ascetic, with the gleaming eyes of a fanatic and the expression of a mystic, intoxicated with religious fervor?

It was Reb Mosze, the melamed or teacher, a supremely pious man. Winter and summer he wore the same sackcloth and lived like the birds upon anything he could pick up, the right hand of the Rabbi Isaac Todros, and after the rabbi the greatest object of veneration in the community. Meir Ezofovitch the grandson of Saul and great grandson of Hersz, did not sit down, but stood erect, and with downcast eyes and evident timidity replied to the melamed's question.

"Rebe! I have not been where is either gladness or work going on. I have been where it is dark, and where people sit in darkness and weep."

"Who can be sad to day and sit in the dark on the holy day of the Sabbath!" exclaimed the melamed.

Some of the older members raised their heads and repeated,—

"Who can sit in the dark?"

And then again they all asked,—

"Where have you been, Meir?"

Meir did not answer at once. His face and downcast eyes expressed timidity and hesitation.

Presently one of the young girls, who sat at the lower end of the table, the same who had supported the great grandmother, clapped her hands and her eyes danced with merriment.

"I know where it is dark, to-day."

All the eyes turned in her direction.

"Where?" they asked.

Brought into prominence, pretty Lia blushed furiously and said in a quieter voice,—

"In Abel Karaim's hut, at the foot of the Karaite hill. Meir, have you been at the Karaim's?"

Amongst the many voices, the melamed's harsh tones dominated.

The young man's timidity seemed to vanish under the more dominant feeling of irritation.

"I have not been in their dwelling, but saved them from a great misfortune?" he said, in a somewhat louder voice.

"From a great misfortune; and from what misfortune pray?" said the melamed, in a mocking tone.

This time Meir raised his eyes and looked straight into the melamed's face.

"Reb Mosze!" he said "you ask who assaulted them? Your scholars did, they do it every Friday night; and why should they not do this thing? since they know—" He hesitated, his eyes fell again. Fear and angry feelings were warring against each other.

"Well, what do they know? Why do you not finish your sentence, Meir? What do they know?" mocked the melamed.

"They know that you, Reb Mosze, praise them for it."

Reb Mosze half raised himself on his seat, his eyes gleamed maliciously and he was about to speak but the young man did not let him, his own voice rang out without hesitation,—

"Reb Mosze," he said, bending his head slightly, "I respect you as my teacher, and I do not ask why you allow your scholars to assault poor people under cover of the night; but I cannot look at their wrongdoing without feeling it deeply, because bad children will grow up bad men; if now they damage a poor man's hut and throw stones at him, they will in time burn down houses and kill people. They would have pulled the hut down and maybe killed the poor people, but I came in time and saved them."

Saying this, Meir sat down on his seat. There was neither fear nor timidity in his face now. He felt that justice was on his side and he looked fearlessly around. At this moment old Saul and his sons raised their hand, and in one voice exclaimed,—

"Sabbath!"

Their voices were solemn, their eyes stern, almost angry.

"Sabbath! Sabbath!" shouted the melamed, throwing his arms wildly about him. "You, Meir, instead of saying the Kidees (prayer), and filling your heart with joy; instead of offering your spirit unto the Angel Matatron who pleads for the tribes of Israel before the Lord; the angel Matatron would give it unto Sar-ha-Oloma, the angel above angels, through him to the Sephiroth, the forces that created the world, to be brought at last before Ensoph the Infinite; instead of all this you go and defend people from some danger and watch over their house and lives. Meir! Meir! you have broken the Sabbath, and will have to confess yourself a sinner and lawbreaker before the public in the synagogue."

The speech of the melamed made a deep impression upon all present. Saul and his sons looked stern, the women amazed and frightened, Lia who had betrayed her cousin had tears in her eyes. Only Ber, Saul's son-in-law, betrayed different feelings, his face wore a kindly, sympathetic expression; the young men looked steadily at Meir, but with friendly feelings.

Meir answered. in a tremulous voice,—

"Jehovah bids us to keep the Sabbath holy in the Mischna and Tora, but also says it be lawful for twenty people to break it in order to save one from danger."

The very act of answering the pious melamed, right hand of Rabbi Todros, was an unheard-of thing, and to contradict him, sheer blasphemy.

The narrow eyes of the teacher burst nearly out of their sockets with rage.

"The Karaims," he yelled, pulling his matted hair, "are an accursed race. Why should you stand up for them? Why do they not light their candles on the Sabbath? Why do they sit in darkness? Why do they cut the throats of birds and animals which serve for food on the top of the neck, instead of underneath? Why do they not know the holy books of Mischna, Gemara and Zohar?"

He spluttered and almost choked with fury.

The voice of Meir sounded quiet and gentle.

"Rebe! they are very poor."

"Ensoph is the avenger and without pity."

"They suffer much from people's persecution."

"It is the Almighty who persecutes them."

"The Almighty does not command us to persecute, not even, as Rabbi Huna, says, if the persecutor be a just man and the persecuted a rogue. The Eternal protects and shields the helpless ones."

Reb Mosze's flashing eyes were riveted upon the young man's face, and his whole body shook in half-expressed rage.

The whole gathering were lost in wonder, horror, and amazement. Saul, from under his bushy eyebrows, darted a threatening look at his grandson and hissed out,—

"Hush!"

Meir bent his head, as a sign of submission, and Saul's sons, in order to appease Reb Mosze, asked him in what consisted the difference of the Talmud and Zohar and the Cabala; and whether one ought to study the first or the last, in order to attain the highest standard of piety.

The melamed spread his arms upon the table, fixed his eyes upon the opposite wall, and began in his drawling voice,—

"Simon ben (son of) Tochai, the great rabbi who lived long ago and knew everything that happened in heaven and upon earth, says, that the Talmud is a mean slave and the Cabala the great queen. What does the Talmud contain? It is full of little, insignificant things. It teaches what to eat, what is clean or unclean, modest or immodest.

"What do the books of the Zohar and Cabala tell us? They tell us about the Lord and his Sephiroth? They tell us their names, their doings and how the world was created. It is written there that the Lord's name is Ensoph; his second name, Notaricon; his third, Gomatria; and his fourth, Ziruph. The Sephiroth, ten in number, are the manifestations of God. The Sephiroth created the world: the primal and archetypical man, the prophets, the power of destruction, the heavenly love. The tenth of the Sephiroth gave birth to the eye that watches over Israel and follows him everywhere, so that trouble should not come near him. All this, and more, teach the Zohar and Cabala. It teaches also that by different combinations of the letters contained in the names of the Lord and his heavenly emanations we may discover mysteries hitherto hidden to mortal eyes. It is a great science, the greatest and only science for the true Israelite. There are some who maintain the Talmud to be the more important, but it is not true; they do not know that the earth will continue to shake and tremble in pain, till the Lord and Israel, the Father and the Matron join in the kiss of love, and the slave gives way to the queen, the Talmud to the Cabala. And when will that come to pass? It will come to pass when the Messiah arrives to bring joy to all *pious and wise* men. Then the Lord will slay the Leviathan, *the great* monster upon which the world stands; all will be bidden to the feast; the wise and pious men to eat the part from the head, the simple and ignorant, from the tail."

The melamed had finished, and sighed deeply; and suddenly descending from the mystic clouds turned his attention to earthly realities. Before him was a dish of daintily prepared fish, and the ascetic liked a good meal on the Sabbath and enjoyed it as he did his prayers and mystic flights.

The whole assembly was silent. Old Saul had listened with great earnestness, and the muscles of his face twitched with a nervous mysterious terror. The sons, likewise seemed to ponder deeply over the hazy problems, searching perhaps for a spark of light to make them more intelligible.

The women sat with their hands crossed, smiled to each other, and murmured softly,—

"A learned man, a truly pious and wise man! a worthy disciple of Rabbi Todros."

A quick glance passed between Meir and Saul's son-in-law, Ber. The eyes of the first looked scornful and angry; the latter, sad and dejected. When the melamed spoke of the monster Leviathan, a smile like a sharp-pointed dagger curled round Meir's lips. Ber answered with a sigh. There was an almost imperceptible smile also upon the lips of some of the young men and then for a while nothing more was audible but the clatter of knives and forks upon the table. After a while Saul took the word,—

"These are great things, great and fearful things which Reb Mosze—thanks be to him—told us. Listen to our learned men, oh children, for they are the foundation of the world. Whosoever respects them and listens to them will be forgiven for his trespasses."

Reb Mosze raised his head from his plate, and with his mouth full, uttered indistinctly,—

"Good deeds bring grace and forgiveness to man. They reveal to him the mysteries of earth and heaven and carry his soul among the Sephiroth!"

A deep and respectful silence greeted this sentence.

Presently a clear young voice interrupted it, saying,—

"Reb Mosze! what do you mean by good deeds? What must we do, in order to save our souls and win grace?"

The melamed looked at his interlocutor and their eyes crossed like swords.

"Is it you, Meir, who have been my pupil for years, to ask that question? Have I not said it over and over again that there is only one meritorious thing in the world, and that is the study of the holy books. Who does that, will be forgiven his sins; who neglects it, is cursed forever and rejected by Israel, be his hands and his soul as spotless as snow."

Saying this, he turned towards Saul and, pointing his dark finger at Meir,—

"He knows nothing, remembers nothing of what I taught him."

The old man bent his furrowed brow before the melamed, and said apologetically,—

"Forgive him, Rebe, he is but a child, he will become wiser in time, and less rash in his judgment;—there have been ever wise and learned men in our family."

Here the old man drew himself proudly up.

"Listen children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren; Our family, the family of the Ezofovitch are not a common family. Thanks to the Lord, may his name be blessed, there is wealth in our strong boxes, and elsewhere scattered.about the world; but our greatest treasure is in the past of our family. Our ancestor was the Senior over all the Jews of this country, and had the favor and the ear of the King. My father Hersz, the great Hersz, lived with noblemen who invited him to their houses and drove him in their carriages, presented him to the King and the Diet because of his great wisdom."

The old man paused and looked around. All eyes were upon him but the melamed's, who sipped his wine, his brow clouded as if in anger; the great-grandmother seemed suddenly to wake from a doze, her eyes lighted up and she whispered,—

"Hersz! Hersz! my husband, Hersz!"

Then Saul went on,—

"In our family there is a great treasure, the like of which is not to be found in Israel. This treasure is the papers of our ancestor, Michael Senior, in which great and wise things are written down. If we had now these writings we should be very happy; unfortunately, nobody knows where they are."

Two heads were stretched out towards the speaker, the moment he mentioned the hidden papers. One was the melamed's, the other Meir's, who looked with burning eyes at his grandfather.

"These papers had been hidden for two hundred years when my father Hersz found them. Where he found them or where they are now, nobody knows, but the old great-grandmother."

"And why has she not told anybody where they are?" chuckled venomously the melamed.

Saul answered, in a sad voice,—

"Reb Nochim Todros had forbidden it."

"And why did not you, Saul, search for them?"

"Reb Baruch Todros, the son of Reb Nochim, and Reb Isaac forbade me to search."

"Let nobody ever search for it," shouted the melamed, raising his hand armed with a fork, "for the writing is full of blasphemy and abominations.

"Rebe Saul! forbid your children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren ever to look for that writing; for whosoever findeth it and readeth it to the people the Cherem will fall upon him, and he will be expelled from Israel. So sayeth Reb Nochim and Reb Barach of blessed memory. Thus sayeth Reb Isaac, may he live a hundred years."

A dead silence followed upon the melamed's violent utterance, interrupted only by a long, tremulous sigh. Whence it came nobody knew, but Meir, very pale, looked intently at his great-grandmother, who seemed to feel his look, for she raised her heavy eyelids and whispered,—

"Meir."

"Bobe," he answered, in a soft, caressing voice.

"Kleineskind" (little child), whispered the great-grandmother, smiled at him sweetly, and went off to sleep again.

The Sabbath feast was drawing to its end, when a thing happened which, to a stranger, would have appeared surpassingly strange, but did not surprise those present in the least. Reb Mosze, whose dark features glowed with the generous wine, offered profusely by the host, suddenly rushed from his chair into the middle of the room.

"Sabbath! Sabbath! joy! joy!" he shouted. "The whole heavenly crew is rejoicing and dancing. David danced before the Ark of the Covenant, why should not the pious man dance if his heart rejoices!" Upon this he danced across the room, around the table, quicker and quicker beat his naked feet upon the floor, all his limbs contorted by frantic motions, till at last, exhausted, he sank heavily upon the floor, wiping the beads of perspiration from his face.

Saul and his two sons looked grave and decorous, without the ghost of a smile upon their countenances. If there was a sarcastic twinkle in the old man's face, nobody noticed it. The languid Ber sat erect, apparently indifferent, but there was a frown upon his forehead Meir had buried his face in his hands, so as to shut out the sight and sound of the melamed's exhibition; but the elder women seemed wholly pleased, and had followed the melamed's frantic dance with the rhythmical swaying of their bodies. Amongst the younger people there was a suppressed giggle.

Presently Sara, Saul's daughter, rose and handed a silver basin around to wash their hands. Murmuring a thanksgiving, they dipped the hands into the water and wiped them on a finely embroidered towel which hung from Sara's shoulders.

This ended the Sabbath feast.

By and by the whole gathering broke into little groups, and the room became filled with lively conversation. Meir, who had been standing thoughtfully at the window, approached the group of elder people. Here Abram, Rafael, and Ber were summing up before their father the last week's transactions; and asked his advice and help. They counted numbers of sacks of corn and various sums received; all their fingers seemed to be in motion. Foreign ports and prices of corn made their eyes glow with excitement. Old Saul looked now what he was, the right man in the right place. The solemn, half-puzzled expression with which he listened to the melamed was gone, his face, full of intelligence, grasped every detail of business at once. He was the patriarch at the head of his family, bestowing advice or praise where it was due.

Meir listened indifferently to these details of buying and selling. It was evident that he had not as yet a personal share in it; but his eyes rested for a minute or so upon Ber. The usually languid and lazy Ber looked a different being. He was in the act of telling his father-in-law about some vast speculation he had in view, and for which he wanted a certain sum from his brothers. His eyes were sparkling, his lips moved very fast, and his hands were trembling with excitement. Meir went towards another group with the melamed in its centre.

"Everything in the world," said the sage, "every human being, animal, blade of glass or stone have their roots above, in the land of spirits. The whole world is like a gigantic tree, with its roots in heaven. It is like a great chain with its last link suspended above; a sea which never dries, because filled continually by an inexhaustible stream of spirits."

Meir approached the window where two young men were absorbed in speculating whether it be true, if a man be unable to see his shadow at Sabbath night, he were doomed to die the same year.

Meir looked around. In the adjacent room the women closely pressed together, were shrilly discussing household matters and the perfections of their children; the young girls congregated in corners, laughing and singing now and then in subdued voices.

Meir's face showed he felt not drawn to any of the groups. He was amongst his people, yet not of them. He quietly left the room, and crossed the dark square in the direction of Reb Jankiel's house.

Whilst at Saul's house the feast had only just terminated, at Reb Jankiel's everything had been removed from the table a long time ago. It had only been a scanty meal, as the master of the house did not care for comforts, and, though very rich, was also very miserly. He had several inns in different villages, and seldom stayed at home, except on the Sabbath, and his wife Zenta and two grown-up daughters looked after the inn and did all the housework besides. The wealth of the house was only displayed upon extraordinary occasions, such as the arrival of rich merchants or a visit of the rabbi, with whom he was a great favorite. Cleanliness and joy were strangers to the place. Meir opened the first room and found it empty. A single tallow candle burning in the socket threw a fitful glimmer upon the blackened walls and stove, and the smell of dampness and fried fish hung heavy in the atmosphere; a sound of loud snoring came from the next room, where the master of the house reposed. Beyond that was a room piled up with trunks and boxes, with linen and rags drying upon lines; here sat a woman rocking a child to sleep, herself crying silently. She raised her head and said a few friendly words to Meir, who passed on toward the door whence several masculine voices were audible. It was the room of the sweet singer Eliezer, and with him were some of the young men, Meir's cousins, who had sat with him at the same table.

Eliezer raised his eyes to the newcomer, who sat quietly down.

"Meir," he said, gently.

"Well, Eliezer."

"You have little patience. I have heard already," pointing to the young men, "about your discussions with the melamed."

There was a mocking light in Meir's eyes.

"Do you mean, Eliezer, that I was ill-advised in speaking to the melamed as I did?"

The cantor nodded.

"It was well spoken and true; but you have no business to say it, it will do you harm."

The young man laughed sadly.

"Let it harm me, I cannot be silent and see them turning the people's heads and making idiots of us all."

"Child! child! how can you mend it?" said a languid, drawling voice from the door.

They looked round; it was only Ber, the quiet and languid Ber, who entered and shut the door carefully after him, then stretched himself at full length upon Eliezer's bed and stared at the ceiling. They were evidently accustomed to see him there, as they did not interrupt their conversation. One of the young men repeated the melamed's discussion on the Sephiroth and the great Leviathan. Another questioned Eliezer whether he thought the study of the Mischna and Zohar sufficient for the atonement of all sins.

Eliezer listened with bent head, in silence; then he said,—

"Read the Tora,[1] there it is written, that the Lord does not heed burnt offerings and incense, but bids us to love the truth, defend the helpless, teach the ignorant, and heal the sick; these are our first duties."

The two young men opened their eyes wide, and said in one voice:

"Then the melamed said what is not true?"

Eliezer remained silent, he evidently did not want to answer, but the young men tugged impatiently at his sleeve. "He said what is not true," he replied at last, in a timid voice.

Meir put his hand upon his friend's shoulder.

"Eliezer, when you came back from the great town, where they taught you how to sing, you told me the same.

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[1] Five Books of Moses.

You opened my eyes, which had already begun to see a little; you explained to me how the Israelites were not the same as they used to be, that the clear fountain of their faith had become polluted, and its waters corrupted our hearts and brains. You taught me, Eliezer, and you have been to me ever since as a brother who helped me out of the darkness; but from that time on I have felt a great restlessness and longing within my soul."

"Eliezer taught you, Meir; Eliezer is silent, and his pupil speaks," drawled out Ber, ironically.

"Oh! if I only could speak!" exclaimed the young man, with sparkling eyes, "if only I knew what to do!" He then added in a low, desponding tone: "But I can neither speak nor do anything. In my mind there is nothing but a great hatred towards those that cheat us, and a great love for those that are deluded."

"Besides a great deal of audacity," hinted Ber, carelessly.

"I have not been audacious yet, but if I knew only how to act I should find the courage," said Meir.

There was silence again, which Meir interrupted,—

"How happy you are, Eliezer!"

"Why am I happy?"

"You have been in the world, seen great things, and heard wise men talk. Oh, if I could go there!"

"Eliezer, tell us about the great world," said the lads, their eyes aglow with curiosity and longing.

Eliezer was the only one of the young men in the community who had seen the world. He owed this to his wonderful voice. Long ago he had told everything there was to tell, but they were never tired of asking and listening again.

He told them about the big houses and the polished people living within; how many of them were Israelites who not only possessed great wealth, but also public consideration; not because of their riches, people were rich enough in Szybow, but for being great scholars in other things than in the Mischna and Gemara.

"We have no schools here that teach us anything, because Rabbi Isaac and Reb Mosze say that worldly knowledge is like the vineyards of Sodoma, which orthodox Israelites ought to shun."

"Eliezer, tell us about the carriages that move without horses, and the great man who invented them."

"Eliezer, do all Israelites observe restrictions about their food?"

"Eliezer, what do they say about our Rabbi Todros?"

"Nothing good."

General astonishment! the Israelites in the world do not speak well of Rabbi Todros! do not believe in Ensoph and the Sephiroth or the Cabala!

"What do they say about the Talmud?"

"They say the Talmud is a good and wise book, written by good and wise men, but that it wants condensing; as there are many things which were good and useful once, but are not so now and do more harm than good."

Great astonishment again. Shorten the Talmud because it is difficult to learn, destroys the memory and bewilders children. That is true. They remembered how it had tired their heads, and little Leibele, the tailor's son, had been made ill and an idiot through it.

"And did anybody ever shorten the Talmud?"

"Yes, the great sage, Moses Maimonides, did it and the rabbis excommunicated him."

The rabbis excommunicated a great sage; then a rabbi can be bad and unjust, and one ought not to believe everything they say.

"And did Moses Maimonides write any other book?"

"Yes, he wrote also 'More Nebuchim, the guide to those who have lost their way,' a wise and good book to make one weep with tenderness and laugh with joy."

"Have you got the book, Eliezer?"

"I have."

"Where did you get it from?"

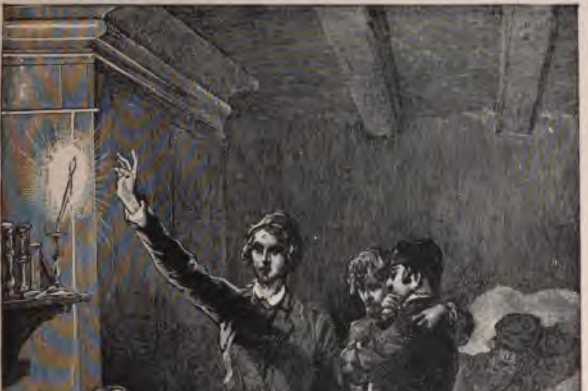
"A wise Israelite, who is an advocate in the great town, gave it to me."

"Eliezer, read us something out of that book."

In this way the ignorant minds of the young men received a ray of light. It was not sufficient to form their minds or guide them to a better life: but enough to show them the darkness they lived in and make them feel the chains which fettered their spirits.

"Eliezer!" called out Meir, "shall we never raise our voices and bid the people wake up and live? Shall we always grope underground like worms, and bear quietly the misery of the people."

Eliezer dropped his eyes and raising his white hands, said,—



"Shall we never raise our voices and bid the people wake up and live?"—Page 60.

"I sing and pray for my people every day, before the Lord."

Meir made a gesture of impatience, Ber raised himself from the bed and laughed aloud, but there was no mirth in his laughter.

"Sing and weep," he said to Eliezer, "your cruel father has crushed all the spirit out of you."

Then he put his hand heavily on Meir's shoulder.

"This is the bold youth, who will try to swim against the current; but I fear the current will be too strong, —where will it carry you?"

When Meir left Eliezer's room he passed again the woman who still bending over the cradle, seemed asleep. The flickering light of the lamp fell upon her yellow, wasted face, which looked more ghastly in her festive cap and the red rose which drooped upon her forehead. Her blue threadbare caftan only half covered the coarse gray linen underneath. She was not an old woman, but overworked, badly used, and troubled. One look at her was sufficient to show she had never known domestic happiness and would never reach the ripe old age amidst grand and great grandchildren as Freida, Hersz's widow. Jenta, the pious Jankeil's wife, was like a dead spirit within a live body.

After the last steps of the visitors had died away in the distance, and nothing was heard in the house but the heavy breathing of the sleeping inmates, Eliezer stood in the open door of his room and looked at the dozing woman.

"Mother!" he said, softly, "why do you not lie down?

Little Chaya has fallen asleep and will not cry again. Lie down, mother, and rest a little."

The woman opened her eyes at the sound of her son's voice.

"Eliezer! come here," she whispered.

The young man came nearer and sat down upon the bed.

"How can I sleep," murmured the tired woman, "when my head is so bad. Little Chaya is ill and may wake up any minute; if she cries, Jankiel will hear and get into a rage."

"Go to sleep, mother," whispered the son, "I will take your place and watch by the cradle."

The yellow, wrinkled face, with the red rose nodding above it, bent down to seek rest, not on the piled up dirty bedding, but upon her son's knees.

Eliezer, with his elbows leaning upon the edge of the bed, his forehead buried in his hands, fell into a reverie; now and then he rocked the cradle with his foot, singing softly.

"Oh! my poor, poor head," moaned the woman in her sleep.

"Poor head of Israel," murmured the young man over the cradle.

About the same time, a little before Eliezer's friends were leaving, a dark human figure crossed swiftly the square, entered the precincts of the synagogue, and disappeared in Rabbi Todros' hut.

Rabbi Todros heard the creaking of the door, and called out from the depth of his room,—

"Is that you, Mosze?"

"Yes, Nasi, it is your humble servant. May the angels watch over your dreams, and the breath of your nostrils be like incense and mirrha to you!"

The deep voice again asked,—

"Where have you been all this time, Mosze?"

"I have been at Saul Esofovitch's. The Sabbath feast is well ordered there, and I go often to rejoice my soul."

"You do well, Mosze, to rejoice on the Sabbath. What news from there?"

"Bad news, O. Nasi, (Sage). Amongst the roses and lilies lurks a venomous reptile."

"What reptile?"

"A reptile that undermines our holy faith and infects the house of Israel with poisonous doctrines?"

"From whose heart sprang that reptile?"

"From the heart of Meir Esofovitch, Saul's grandson."

"Have you heard it with your ears and seen with your own eyes? Tell me, Mosze, I am responsible for all the souls in the community, and ought to know everything."

A momentary silence ensued. The melamed, squatting in the dark entrance, was evidently collecting his thoughts.

Presently he began, in his hoarse voice,—

"I have heard and seen myself that Meir Esofovitch was not present at the prayers and came in after the Sabbath had begun. I asked where he had been, and he said he had defended the hut of Abel Karaim and his granddaughter, Golda."

The voice from the room said,—

"He defended the heretics and broke the Sabbath!"

"He does not rejoice on the Sabbath, and says that in the holy book nothing is said about Ensoph and his Sephiroth, and that the Almighty does not command to persecute heretics."

"Abomination comes from the mouth of the young man. The soul of his great-grandfather Hersz has entered into his body."

"Nasi," said Mosze, a little louder than before. An indistinct murmur behind the door encouraged him to proceed.

"He will search for the writing of Michael Ezofovitch, I have seen it in his eyes, and will find it. If he find it and read it aloud to the people they will rebel against your holy teaching."

"If he find the writing, my right hand will be down upon him and crush him into powder." Mosze! what did he do after supper?"

"He went to Reb Jankiel's house and talked long with the Cantor Eliezer, I saw him through the window."

"Who else was there, Mosze?"

"Chaim, Mendel, Ariel and Ber, Saul's son-in-law."

"What did they talk about?"

"Nasi! I was all ears whilst I stood under the window. They bewailed the darkness in which they are kept, said that the faith of Israel was like a clear river which had been polluted. Eliezer said he sang and prayed for his people, and Meir replied it were not enough to sing and pray, but a mighty voice ought to call out to the people to be up and doing, and if he only could."

" Race of vipers ! " growled the voice from the room.

" Nasi ! who are the race of vipers ? "

After a short silence the answer came :

" The family of Ezofovitch.

CHAPTER III.

A FEW months had passed by. A balmy evening had followed upon a warm day in May.

Shortly before sunset, two beings passed along one of the narrowest and poorest streets of the town. One was a she-goat, white as snow; the other, a girl. The goat was leading the way, jumping nimbly at the branches of the few scattered trees. The girl walked sedately behind. It was difficult to guess her age, which might have been thirteen or seventeen. Though tall, her figure was quite undeveloped, but the expression of thoughtfulness gave her the air of a woman. She was poorly dressed in a faded cotton gown and coarse low shoes. Her only ornament was several strings of roughly cut corals which set off her clear, olive complexion. The cheeks were thin and hollow, she seemed all eyes, but they were of a soft, velvety blackness, fringed with long eyelashes. In the erect bearing of this child-woman there was something proud and untamed. She walked straight on, but whenever the sound of human voices reached her ear she pressed closer to the wall or hedge, and her eyes seemed to express doubt or fear as, if she wanted to escape from observation. They seemed to be the best of friends these two, for whenever the goat indulged in some wilder freak, a low call from the girl would instantly bring it back. At the end of the narrow street a beautiful stretch of emerald green bathed in the evening sun burst upon the eye. It was a little meadow close to the town, fringed with a birch wood on one side, with large tracts of fields beyond, and in the distance a long, blue line of forests. At the sight of the meadow the girl slackened her steps, called back the goat, and holding her by the horns, stood still and looked upon the lively scene which displayed itself before her eyes. Some twenty children and as many more goats, white, black, and speckled ones, were mixed up together in wild confusion. Merry voices, shouts of laughter mixed with plaintive protests from the goats, filled the air. The girl looked impassively at the children chasing the goats, which would not be caught or yield obedience. The merry scene was evidently neither attractive nor new to her: she seemed to wait for something, perhaps for the disappearance of the children from the meadow. Presently the scattered voices united in a shout of triumph; their playful charges had at last been captured. The more rebellious ones were led by the horns, others were boldly bestridden, the girls holding fast by the long hair, and all trotted off in the direction of the town; when soon amidst clouds of dust, children and goats disappeared in one of the broader streets.

The little meadow was now lonely and deserted; only the evening breeze whispered in the branches of the birch-trees, and the setting sun covered it with a transparent, rosy haze. The girl loosened her hands from the goat's neck, which bounded forwards, the girl following swiftly.

She stopped suddenly, her eyes, fixed upon one point, grew bright with excitement.

Upon a fallen trunk near the wood sat a young man, absorbed in reading.

The girl went quickly and silently up to him, bent down and pressed her lips to his hand. He started, withdrew his hand, and blushed with confusion.

"You do not know me," said the girl, in a low, earnest voice.

"No, I do not," answered the young man.

"It is not likely you should, but I know you. You are Meir Ezofovitch, the grandson of the wealthy Saul. I have often seen you sitting in the porch of your beautiful house, seen you passing with your book along the Karaite's hill." She said all this in a quiet and even tone, neither blushed, nor showed any sign of timidity, but her eyes looked more luminous, and there was a very sweet expression about her lips.

"Who are you?" asked Meir, in a low tone.

"I am Golda, the granddaughter of the despised and persecuted Abel Karaim." Her voice seemed to lose that even steadiness, and trembled slightly. "They all persecute Abel Karaim and his granddaughter: you alone stand up for them. I wanted to thank you long ago." Meir's eyes drooped, the blush had not yet died out from his face.

"Peace be with you and your grandfather Abel; may the right hand of the Lord, who loves and protects those who suffer, be over your house!"

"Thanks be to you for these words," whispered the girl, and sitting down at the feet of the young man, she raised her clasped hands and murmured,—

"Meir, you are wise and beautiful. Your name means the light, and I have seen the light when I see you. I wanted to meet you long ago, and speak with you. Though you are the grandson of the wealthy Saul, and I the granddaughter of the poor Karaim who makes baskets, we are all children of the one Lord, and I may raise my eyes to you, look into the light, and be happy!"

And she looked indeed happy. There was life and color now in the hollow cheeks, the lips were quivering and the eyes raised towards the young man, shining with tears. Meir had listened with his eyes fixed upon the ground; when she left off speaking, he raised them and looked at her.

"Golda! how grateful you are, and—how beautiful!"

For the first time during their conversation Golda's eyes fell, and mechanically she swept and gathered around her the tall grasses with the waving plumes.

Meir looked at her for a long time in silence. He felt shy and confused, yet radiant with a new-born joy.

"Sit here by me," he said, in a low voice.

The girl raised herself and sat down by his side. She recovered her usual composure and quiet earnestness.

They were silent for a long while. Overhead, the birch trees waved and murmured. The birds were singing their even song. Meir seemed absorbed in the contemplation of the long grasses. At last he first broke the silence,—

"Why do you drive out your goat so late in the day?"

"I do not care to come when the other girls are there."

"Do they, too, persecute you?"

"They laugh at me and call me ugly names; sometimes drive me off, so as not to be near me."

Meir's eyes were full of pity.

"Golda! are you afraid of the girls?"

Golda shook her head in denial.

"I have grown up in fear and I am used to it. Fear is my brother. But when I go home the old zeide asks whether I have met anybody or anybody has hurt me. I cannot say what is untrue, and if I say the truth the old zeide becomes very sad and weeps."

"Has the zeide brought you up?"

The girl nodded.

"My father and mother died when I was no bigger than this little shrub. Zeide had no other children, he rocked me and looked after me; carried me on his arms when I was ill, and kissed me. When I grew older, he taught me how to spin, to read the Bible, and told me the beautiful stories the Karaites brought with them from far-away countries. Zeide is good, zeide is lovable, and so old and so very poor. His hair is as white as snow and his eyes as red as coral from weeping. Whilst he plaits his baskets I often sit at his feet, with my head upon his knees, and he strokes my hair with trembling hands, sighs and repeats: 'Josseime! josseime' (orphan)."

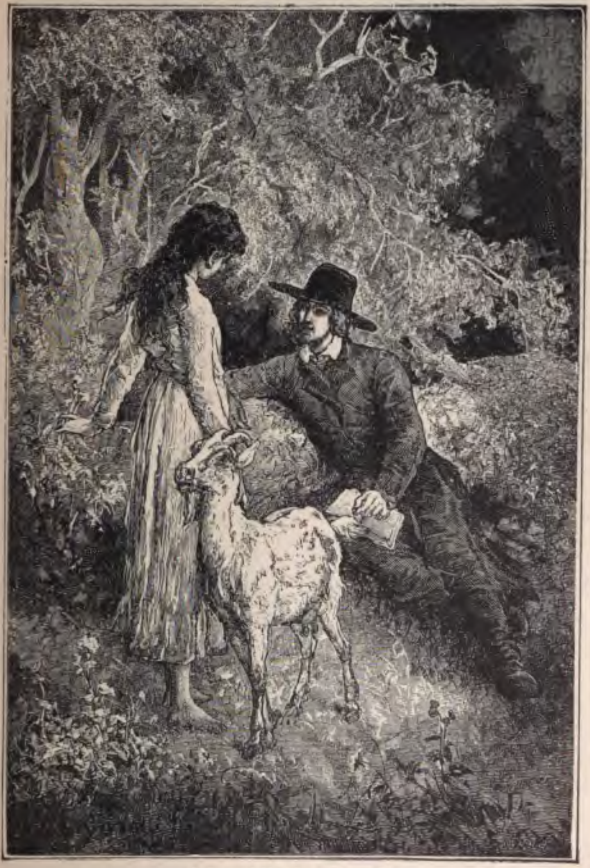
Suddenly, from a distance, the bleating of the goat was audible. Meir looked round:

"Will not your goat go astray in the wood?"

"No," said the girl quietly, "she comes at once when I call her; she is my sister."

"Fear is your brother and the goat your sister," said the young man smilingly.

The girl turned round and gave a peculiar call. There



Meir and Golda.—Page 71.

was a rustle amongst the branches, sounds of quick motion, presently the white creature appeared between the overhanging branches of the birch-tree, and gazed with intelligent eyes at the young people.

"'Come here," said Golda.

The goat came close to, and the girl stroked her silky, white hair, Meir stroked her, too, and smiled. The goat bleated and jumped into the air to reach a savory branch above.

"'How obedient she is," said Meir.

"'She loves me," said Golda, simply. "I brought her up, as zeide brought me up. She was a tiny kid when zeide brought her as a gift for me, and I carried it in my arms, fed it, and when it was ill, I sang to it as zeide sung to me." She smiled and looked like a child of not more than fourteen.

"'Would you like to have another kid?" asked Meir.

"Yes, I should like it very much. When zeide has made more baskets and I have spun some more wool, we will buy a little white one in the market."

"And for whom do you spin?"

"Some good women give me the wool to spin. Hana, the wife of Witebski, and your aunt, the wife of Ber."

"And do you come to our house, sometimes, Golda, to take the wool for spinning?"

"Yes, I come sometimes."

"And why have I never seen you?"

"Because it is a secret. Ber and his wife, Sara, are very charitable, but do not wish people to know that they help me and the zeide. I come when there is nobody in the house, except perhaps your cousin Lia, and I always manage so that the dark man does not see it."

"What dark man? Who is the dark man?" said Meir, wonderingly.

"The Rabbi Isaac Todros," whispered Golda, mysteriously.

At the sound of that name the smile died out from Meir's face, and his brow darkened. He almost seemed to forget the girl at his side and fell into a brown study.

"Meir," whispered a timid voice near his shoulder, "what has made you so thoughtful, and why are your eyes sad? Your name means the light. Do you not always live in the light of joy and contentment?"

The young man shook his head.

"No," he whispered back, "there is great sadness in my heart."

"Meir! whence does that sadness come?"

"It comes from dark men, and from its being, oh so dark around us."

She echoed sadly.

"Oh, so dark."

Meir looked absently into the distance, where the dark line of the forest stood out against the golden sky.

"Golda!" he said.

"Yes, Meir."

"Did you ever wish to go beyond yon forest, away, far away into the world?"

The girl was silent, but her face showed that she wished for nothing, as long as she could be with him.

"I should like to borrow a pair of wings," continued Meir, "and fly away into the world."

"Do you not like your beautiful house? and are not your relations dear to you, that you should wish to fly away from them?" whispered the girl, half frightened.

"I like the house and love my relations," said the youth dreamily, "but I should like to learn wise things and be able to teach others; and am also curious to know how the stars move in the heavens above, and the plants grow upon earth; how many books have been written; to read them all and learn from them God's thoughts and the progress of the nations; I would fill my soul with great thoughts, as the sea is filled with water. I should like ——"

Here he sighed, as if he could not find words strong enough to express his wishes and longings. After a while he said, more composedly,—

"I should like to be as happy as Rabbi Akiba was."

"And who was Rabbi Akiba," asked Golda, shyly.

"He was a great man. I often read his history. I was reading it when you came."

"I know a great many beautiful stories, they grow in my soul like sweet roses. Give me another rose, Meir, to take care of when I do not see you."

Their looks met. A soft, dreamy smile was on Meir's lips.

"Do you know Hebrew," he asked.

The girl nodded. "Yes. I know. Zeide taught me."

Meir turned a few leaves in the heavy book and read,—

"Calba Sheva was a wealthy man. His palaces were unto mountains high, and his garments shone with gold and costly stones, and in his gardens grew balmy cedars, broad-leaved palms, and roses of Sharon.

"But more beautiful by far than his great palaces, than his sweet-smelling cedars and roses of Sharon, was his young daughter, Rachel.

"There dwelt upon the mountain a youth named Joseph Akiba, and he tended his master's herds.

"And it came to pass that the beautiful Rachel came to her father, fell upon her face before him, kissed his feet, wept, and said to him,—

"Let me go and marry Joseph Akiba, to live with him in the lowly hut upon the mountain.

"Calba Sheva was proud and hard of heart. He fell into a great wrath against the beautiful Rachel and bade her forget the young shepherd.

"But she went forth from the great palace and took nothing with her except her black eyes which shone as diamonds, with tears, and her black hair which was like a crown upon her brow. And she went upon the mountain, entered the lowly hut, and said,—

"'Akiba, thy wife has come into your house.'

"Akiba felt a great joy and dried the tears that hung like diamonds upon her eyelashes, and wise words, like honey, flowed from his lips; she listened and was happy.

"'Akiba,' she said, 'thou will be like a great star to lighten the ways of Israel.'

"Calba Sheva was proud and hard of heart. He did not send either food or garments to his daughter upon the mountain, and said: "Let her suffer hunger and know poverty.'

"The beautiful Rachel suffered hunger and knew poverty. There came a day when she had no food to put into Akiba's mouth, and she grew thoughtful.

"Akiba said: 'It matters not that I be hungry,' and began telling her wise things; but she arose, descended from the mountain, and went into the town and called aloud: 'Who will give me a measure of millet for the black crown upon my head.' They gave her the measure of millet and took off from her head the crown more beautiful than pearls and diamonds.

"And she came back upon the mountain, entered the lowly hut, and said: 'Akiba, I have food to put into thy mouth, but thy soul lacketh and I have nothing to feed it with. Go into the world and fill thy soul with wisdom that comes from the lips of wise men. I remain here, and on the threshold will I sit and spin and tend your herds, and look along the road until you return like the sun which cometh back to disperse the darkness of the night.'

"And Akiba went forth,—

Here the reader stopped, as close to his shoulder the girl repeated, in a wondering, awed voice,—

"And Akiba went forth."

"And Akiba went forth," continued Meir. "The beautiful Rachel tended the herds and sat spinning on the threshold, and looked down the road whence he was to return shining with wisdom.

"Seven years had passed. It was in the evening, when the moon pours his silvery light upon the earth, and the trees and plants are silent as if the spirit of the Infinite were upon them, that brings peace and silence to the world.

"That evening a tall and pale man came from behind the mountain. His limbs trembled like the leaves when the wind stirs them, and his hands were stretched out to heaven. And when he approached the lowly hut, tears ran down his face, for he was Akiba, the husband of the beautiful Rachel.

"Akiba stood under the open window of his hut and listened to the voices of the people speaking within. It was Rachel who spoke to her brother, whom the father had sent out to her. 'Come back to the house of Calba Sheva,' said the brother; and she replied, 'I am waiting for Akiba and guarding his house.' The brother said, 'Akiba will never come back. He has left you and brought shame upon you.' And she answered, 'Akiba has not left me. I sent him forth to the source of wisdom and bade him fill his soul thereat.' 'He drinks at the source of wisdom, and you bathe in tears and your body dries up in misery.'—'Let my eyes run over with tears, and my body eaten by misery, I will guard my husband's house. And if he stood before me now, he for whom my soul is filled with love, and said, "Rachel, I have come back, so that thy eyes should weep no more, but I have drunk but little from the source of wisdom," I would say to him, "go forth and drink more."'

"The pale traveller who stood under the window which was open, became paler still when he heard Rachel's words; his limbs shook from great emotion, and he went back whence he had come.

"Again seven years passed. And a day arrived when the sun poured a stream of golden light upon the earth, the trees moved in the wind and the flowers burst forth and the birds sang, and the people rejoiced as if the spirit of the Eternal had breathed upon them, who bringeth life and joy to the world.

"A great crowd went along the road that leads up the mountain to the shepherd's hut. In the midst of them walked a tall man and his face shone like the sun with wisdom, and from his mouth came words as sweet as honey and as balmy as mirrha. The people bowed low before him and hung upon his lips, and called out with great love, 'Oh, Rabbi!' And a woman rushed through the crowd, fell upon her face and embraced the Master's knees. She held the spindle in her hand, rags covered her body, her face was lean, because fourteen years of misery had eaten up her body; her eyes were deeply sunk, because fourteen years of tears had washed them out.

"'Go thy ways, beggar woman,' said the people, but the Master raised her up from the earth and pressed her to his heart; for it was Joseph Akiba and the woman was his wife Rachel. 'Behold the well which moistened my parched soul with hope whilst my head with yearning and labor dived into the source of wisdom.'

"Thus spoke the Master to the people, and he wished to put upon Rachel's head a crown of gold and pearls. 'Thou, Rachel,' he said, 'tookest from thy head thy beautiful hair to feed my hungry mouth, I will adorn thy brow with a costly crown.'

"But she stayed his hand and raised her eyes which had become beautiful again, and said,—

"'Oh, Rabbi! thy glory is my crown!'"

The young man had finished reading and raised his eyes to the girl at his side. Golda's face was glowing and her eyes full of tears.

"A beautiful story, Golda, is it not?"

"Beautiful," she answered, swaying her body softly in ecstatic delight.—Suddenly, her eyes dried up, she grew very pale, and stood up erect,—

"Meir! if you were Akiba, and I the daughter of Calba Sheva, I would do the same for you." And slowly she raised the heavy tresses and twisted them around her head. "And I have a black crown like Rachel."

Her shining eyes fixed upon Meir, she said, in a quiet voice: "I would give my eyes for you, Meir; what use are they to me if I could see you no longer?"

The young man blushed deeply; it was not from shyness now, but from emotion. The girl was so innocent, so untamed, and withal so beautiful, with her wealth of hair and the passionate words upon the serious lips.

"Golda!" said Meir, "I will come some day and see your grandfather."

"Come!" she replied, "your presence will bring light into our house."

The sun had set behind a purple cloud. The little pond, half hidden amongst flags and osiers, shone like a silver sheet.

"Why do you look at the pond?" asked Meir, whose eyes could not take themselves off from the girl's face.

"I should like to cut some of the willow branches and osiers, to take them home; zeide makes baskets from it and sells them in the market to the peasants. He buys bread with the money, and sometimes fish. It is long since he has had anything to make baskets with, and it makes him sad."

"And why do you not take what you want?"

"I am not allowed to gather any."

"Why not? The meadow belongs to the community, and people are allowed to take what they want."

"What of that, if they are allowed. We do not belong to them, do not believe in the Talmud, and burn no lights on the Sabbath."

Meir jumped up eagerly.

"Come, Golda, cut as much as you like, I shall be near, and nobody will harm you."

Golda's face brightened. She took Meir's knife, which he had offered, and blithely went towards the pond. She was safe under his protection and able to provide for the grandfather what he wanted, She looked the child again when she called to the goat and looked back to see whether Meir was following. They both stood on the verge of the pond. In an instant Golda threw off her shoes, shortened her dress, and went into the water. Meir looked on whilst she was bending down and cutting the flexible branches, and the evening light played upon her shiny plaits. Now and then she looked up and smiled, showing two rows of pearly teeth. Meir smiled back in sympathy. The goat stood by and craned her neck to see her mistress. Presently Golda uttered a cry of delight.

"What is it?" asked Meir.

"Oh the beautiful flowers!"

"What flowers?"

The slender figure half-emerged from the rushes and stretched out her hand, holding a broad-leaved water lily, but, before Meir had put his hand out to receive it, the flower dropped from the girl's nerveless hand, and an expression of terror came upon her face. "The dark man," she whispered, and crouched low amongst the tall reeds.

Meir looked round. At a short distance from under the low undergrowth appeared a strange figure. It was a man below the average height, of very dark complexion, his black hair was slightly tinged with gray, and his beard fell down to his waist. He was dressed in a long narrow coat, much worn, and the coarse linen shirt, open in front, displayed a yellow craning neck. He walked fast and noiselessly by, in slippers. Birds fluttered about him. They evidently knew him well, as they would occasionally perch upon his back or hair. Both his hands were filled with plants. He passed close to where Meir stood, without looking up; the latter mechanically bowed his head in sign of respect and humility, but raised it at once, and his brow contracted, as if in pain. He followed him with his eyes across the meadow, and through his clenched teeth muttered, "Rabbi Isaac Todros."

CHAPTER IV.

Rabbi Isaac Todros showed unmistakable traces of his Spanish origin. These wanderers upon earth, who cling so tenaciously to their customs and traditions, nevertheless absorb something of the country where they have lived for any length of time. The darkest of dark complexions, eyes and hair, and the most fiery temperament belonged to Isaac Todros.

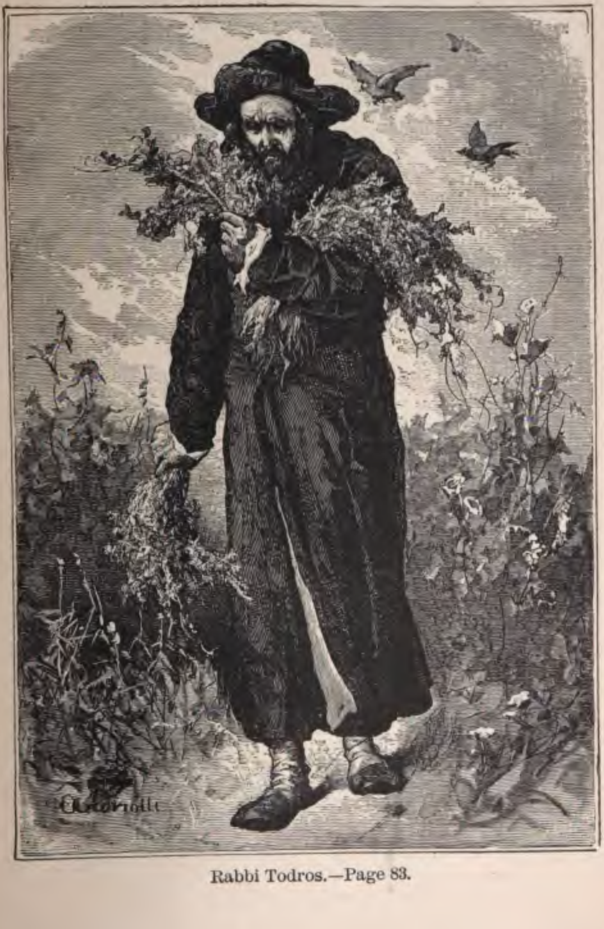
What was the real position he occupied in the community?

He was not a priest. The rabbis are not priests; and no nation is further removed from theocratic rule than the Israelites. He was not an administrator of the community, as the civil affairs were dealt with by the Elders of the Cahala, the rabbi's function in the Cahala being that of guardian over religious laws and ceremonies. His was a higher position altogether. By birth he belonged to a princely family, and claimed the title of Nasi, a family who had produced great and learned men. He himself was deeply learned in the sacred books, especially the Cabala, and lived the life of an ascetic and a saint.

Those little conversant with religious matters relating to the Israelites, might presume the people of Szybow belonged to one of the dark sects of the Chasidim who exalt the Cabala above all religious and worldly science. This was not the case. They did not look upon themselves as dissenters, but as true believers in the Talmud; they had simply joined the Cabala to the Talmud and Tora, and by and by had begun to look upon it as the highest authority. But Chasidism had passed over the community at one time, and left its traces behind. It was said that Reb Nochim, the rabbi who struggled with Hersz Ezofovitch for supremacy, had been a disciple of Best, the founder of the sect; and, though he never openly belonged to them, yet he introduced some of their doctrines into the community. The main doctrines were a boundless veneration for the Cabala and for those that were given to its study, and deep hatred towards aliens and their science.

Rabbi Isaac's dark forehead was ploughed in deep furrows, which grew deeper when he tried to pierce the mysteries of earth and heaven through the combination of letters contained in the names of God and the angels. Gleams of joy or of terror shone in his eyes, according to whether he contemplated the bliss or the anguish of the future life. His back was bent with poring over the holy books, and his body dried up with spiritual and physical castigation.

He had been married even before the hair of maturity had begun to grow upon his face. But he soon divorced his wife when he found that with her household duties she hindered him from concentrating his mind upon holy matters. His three children were with his brother, and he himself lived like a hermit, wholly given up to prayers and mystic contemplations. He cared nothing for bodily comforts and lived upon the gifts sent by his ardent worshippers.



Rabbi Todros.—Page 83.

These gifts were small and insignificant; he would not take anything costly; neither did he accept payment for the advice or medicine which he bestowed upon the faithful.

The earliest dawn would see some silent figures glide across the schoolyard and noiselessly deposit some bread, or cake, or an earthen dish of food before his door.

About this time the rabbi would be at his prayers before the open window and fix his eyes, tired with nightly study, upon the far East, towards Jerusalem and the invisible ruins of the Temple. After that he took some of the bread, ate sparingly and threw the remainder to the birds, which at that time would come in clouds, and almost darken the little window. Some with joyful twitter carried the food to their nests, others perched upon the bent shoulders of their benefactor, even the swallows nesting over the window peeped out at him with fearless eyes. At such time the austere features did relax a little, he was even known to smile. The birds knew him well, not only those in town, but likewise in the wood where he went for prayer and meditation, and to collect the plants of which he composed his medicines. One of his ancestors, Todros Halevi, had been a physician of great repute in those times, when Israelites devoted themselves to other sciences than mere religious study. The knowledge of the properties of plants and drugs had been handed down from generation to generation in the family, and increased their mysterious, almost miraculous reputation. In summer and autumn, a pungent, aromatic smell pervaded the atmosphere of the Rabbi's dwelling; layers upon layers of plants were spread upon the floor, to catch the few rays of sun, and sadly out of place looked these pale blossoms amongst the dust accumulated for ages.

It was a mere anchorite's cell; the furniture consisted of a small, narrow bed, a deal table, a few stools and some heavy boards, riveted to the wall, full of books. Amongst them some twelve heavy volumes were conspicuous by their size, old print, and heavy parchment binding. One of those was the Talmud, above it the Ozar-ha-kabod, written by the same ancestor, Halevi Todros, the first Talmudist who believed in the Cabala. Toldoth-Adam, an epic describing the first man and exile. Sepher-Yetzira (the book of creation), an apocalyptic description of the creation of the universe. Schiur-Koma, a plastic description of God's physical attributes, dealing with the dimensions of his head, feet, hands, and especially his beard, which according to the book, reaches the length of 10,500 parasanghi. But on the highest shelf, and evidently the volume most in use, was the book of Light, the Zohar, an extensive and deep treatise of Chochma Nistar (Cabala), which in the name of Rabbi Simon-ben-Jochai, who lived several centuries before, was published by Moses of Leon in the thirteenth century.

Such were the books of which consisted Isaac Todros' collection; such the source whence he drew his wisdom, and over the study of which he consumed his body. The subtle aroma of these volumes filled him with mystic emotion, and added fuel to the deep hatred towards everything foreign, or inimical to these dark doctrines.

Over these books he spent the greater part of the night. On Sabbath or festive nights there was a slight difference;

he did not sit alone. At those times Reb Mosze, the melamed, sat at his feet, whose function it was to snuff the single tallow candle, which the pious student is not allowed to do for himself. A truly strange sight those two represented, the rabbi bent over his books and the melamed crouching at his feet, his eyes riveted upon the Sage, expecting every moment the revelation of fearful mysteries from the combination of the sacred letters.

When Isaac Todros returned after sunset with great bunches of herbs in his hands, he found his faithful follower squatting in a dark corner of the entrance, deep in meditation.

"Mosze!" called the rabbi, gliding swiftly and noiselessly through the entrance.

"What is your will, Nasi?"

"Go, Mosze, to old Saul's house and tell him that the Rabbi Isaac Todros will visit his house to-morrow."

The little squatting figure jumped up, as if moved by springs, and the bare feet flew across the square towards Saul's house. There he crossed the porch and passage, and half opening the door of the sitting-room, shouted triumphantly,—

"Reb Saul! A great joy and honor is awaiting you. The Rabbi Isaac Todros, the greatest Sage of the world, will visit your house to-morrow."

From the interior of the room the voice of Saul replied:

"Saul Ezofovitch, his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, will wait for the coming of Rabbi Isaac in joy and longing; may he live a hundred years!"

"May he live a hundred years!" echoed the voice of the melamed, and quickly disappeared, shutting the door behind him.

Saul was sitting on the old-fashioned sofa, with the book of Zohar before him, and judging by the puzzled and distracted expression of his countenance, had not derived much spiritual benefit from the reading. The melamed's announcement seemed to increase his bewilderment, and with corrugated brow he turned to his son Rafael, who was busy balancing his monthly accounts.

"What does he want with us?"

Rafael shrugged his shoulders.

"Has he any grudge against us?"

Rafael lifted his head and answered,—

"He has."

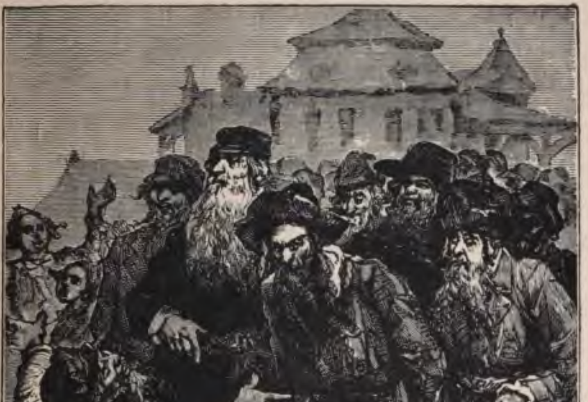
"What grudge can he have? Has anybody done wrong?"

Rafael shot out the word.

"Meir."

Both father and son looked troubled. Isaac Todros very seldom visited the houses of rich people and then only, when he heard of any religious shortcoming. The lower classes came to him readily, as soon as summoned and were always at his beck and call.

Though an ascetic and scorning worldly goods, Rabbi Isaac by no means despised any demonstrations in his honor; for this reason all the poor people, in fact all those who wanted to please and conciliate him, addressed him by the princely title of Nasi, and his passage through the town was always the sign for more or less festive demonstrations.



"The whole group was headed by the melamed walking backwards."
Page 87.

It wanted a few hours to midday, when Saul Ezofovitch with thoughtful mien, watched a group of men crossing the square. Saul's whole family, clad in their finest garments had gathered together to do honor to the great dignitary. Amidst a group of men dressed in black, walked the Rabbi; on one side of him, the pious Jankiel, on the other David Kalman, one of the most prominent men of the town, therefore enjoying the title of moreine (reverend). The whole group was headed by the melamed, walking backwards, his face turned towards the rabbi. It could not be properly called walking, it was more like a frantic dance accompanied by an occasional stumbling upon the uneven pavement. A great many children watched from a distance the melamed's performance, and tried to imitate him, jumping, waving their arms, and filling the air with noise indescribable.

Presently, the door of Saul's sitting-room was pushed open and in rushed the melamed, breathless and excited. His joy was quite sincere. Poor little melamed, what was it after all that made him so glad?

"Rebi Saul," he said, panting, "the great blessing is approaching your house."

Saul gravely inclined his head; it was not an unmixed blessing to him. The other members of the family were, on the contrary, wholly pleased and gratified at the unexpected honor, all except Ber, who always looked languid and impassive when not engaged in business transactions.

When the rabbi had arrived as far as the porch, his two satellites, Rebe Jankeil and Moreine Kalman, put their *hands under his elbows* and almost carried him through the passage to where Saul stood on the threshold to receive his visitor, and then retired to the porch to await his return.

Saul bent his gray head, saying,—

"Who bows before the wise man, praises the greatness of the Creator."

The chorus of male and female voices repeated after him,—

"Who bows before the wise man . . ." but Rabbi Todros raised his finger, which travelled slowly round the room, and then almost hissed out,—

"Hush!"

A deadly silence followed. The finger still pointing at the congregated members of the family, he said in a commanding voice,—

"Be off!"

Upon this there was a great rustle of dresses; frightened and disappointed faces were seen disappearing quickly toward the inner apartments.

Only the two remained, the white-haired patriarch and the spare, keen-eyed sage. There was an almost threatening look upon Saul's contracted brow, when he saw his family so unceremoniously disposed of; nevertheless, in an equable voice, and slightly bending his head, he said:

"Rabbi! pray, take the seat under my roof which pleases you best."

He did not give him the title of Nasi.

Rabbi Isaac shot a displeased look at him and sat down upon the sofa. His figure was not bent down any longer, he sat straight and erect, his eyes fixed upon Saul, who sat opposite him.

"I have driven them away," he said, pointing to the door. "Why did you bring them together? I wanted to see you."

Saul was silent.

"I have bad news for you," he said quickly: "your grandson Meir has an impure soul. He is a Kofrim (heretic)."

Saul remained silent, but his face twitched ominously.

"He is a heretic," repeated the rabbi, in a louder tone, "he slanders our holy religion, has no respect for wise men, breaks the Sabbath, and lives in friendship with heretics."

"Rabbi," began Saul.

"You listen when I speak," interrupted tbe sage.

The old man pressed his lips together, convulsively.

"I came to tell you that you are bringing your grandson up badly, and that it is altogether your fault that he has turned out what he is. Why did you not allow the melamed to flog him at school, when he would not learn the Gemara, laughed at the teacher, and tempted the others to do the same? Why did you send him to the Edomite, who lives amongst the gardens, to be taught reading, writing in their language, and other abominations! Why did you not punish him with your own hand, the other day, when he broke the Sabbath and contradicted the melamed at your own table? Why do you spoil his sinful soul with your love and do not set him to study the holy books, and look upon his abominations as one struck with blindness?"

The rabbi was exhausted with speaking and breathed hard.

"Rabbi," said Saul, in a subdued voice, "do not be hard upon me, I could not help it. The child is the son of my youngest son, who died early. After the death of his parents, I took the child to my house and vowed he should never feel himself an orphan. I was then a widower myself and brought him up in my arms. I nursed him and so did his old great-grandmother, who would have laid down her life to make him happy. He is the costliest jewel in her crown, and now that her lips are silent from great age, it is for him alone they will open. That is the reason, Rabbi, why he was indulged more than any of my other children, and my hand weaker with him. When the melamed scolded and flogged him like the other children, I rushed into the schoolroom, abused the melamed, and took the child away. It was sinful, because the melamed is a wise and pious man. But, Rabbi, I could not bear to see the bruises upon the tender skin of my son's son. When I saw bruises upon the other children of my sons and daughters, I said nothing, because their fathers were alive, but when I saw them upon the orphan, my heart overflowed with grief and I wept aloud and then fell into sin."

"That was not your only sin," said the rabbi unmoved. "Why did you send him to the Edomite for instruction?"

"Rabbi!" replied Saul, "how could he get on in the world without knowing the language of the country, without being able to sign his name to a check or an agreement? My sons and grandsons have immense business transactions and he will have the same when he marries, and will be rich when he enters into his father's possessions. How could he transact business with strangers had I not sent him to the Edomite?"

"Perdition upon the Edomite and his teaching; may the Lord have no mercy upon him," growled the rabbi. "But why did you not train your grandson for the life of a student of the holy books instead of that of a merchant," he added after a while.

"Rabbi!" replied Saul, "our family, the family of Ezofovitch have been merchants from father to son; such is our custom."

Saying this he drew himself up. The remembrance of his family made him bolder and prouder. But nothing could be compared to the scorn and fierceness with which the rabbi hissed out the words,—

"The family of Ezofovitch!—The family of Ezofovitch," he added louder, "have always been like a peppercorn upon the palate of Israel."

"Rabbi!" he exclaimed "amongst them were diamonds of the purest water; the very Edomites began to hold Israel in respect when they came to know them."

"In your family," said the rabbi, in a trenchant voice, "lurks an unclean spirit which manifests itself at various times in one of its members. It is written that all the spirits which emanate from the Sephiroth have to pass Ibur-Gilgul, the earthly pilgrimage. They pass from one human body to another, till they become purified and are allowed to return whence they came. He who leads a pious, saintly life goes back at once to the Sephiroth, and another spirit appears to take his place. Misery, sorrow, and sin will dwell upon earth until all the spirits emanating from the Sephiroth have accomplished their Ibur-Gilgul. And how can those spirits come upon earth when there are so many impure spirits, who pass from one body to another, thereby preventing others from taking their place. The very Messiah is waiting; for he cannot come into the world until the last spirit has been purified, and these impure souls delay the great day of Jobel-ha-Gader, the arrival of the Messiah. In your family there is such a spirit. He first entered into the body of Michael Senior, then into the body of Hersz, and he dwells now within your grandson Meir. I recognized the proud and rebellious spirit, and therefore my heart turned away from him." Whilst Isaac Todros was explaining to Saul the mystery of the transmigration of souls, a remarkable change had taken place in the old man's face. The expression of pride and dignity had vanished altogether, he looked sad and humbly bent his head before the Sage.

"Rabbi! blessings upon your head, for displaying your great wisdom before my eyes. Your words are true, and your eyes can see the spirit within the body. I will tell you one thing: When my son Rafael brought little Meir to my house, I took the child in my arms and kissed him, as he seemed to remind me of my son Benjamin; but the great-grandmother took him from me, put him on the floor and looked at him a long time, and then called aloud: 'He is not like Benjamin, he is like my husband Hersz. Tears streamed down her face, she pressed the child to her heart and her lips repeated: 'Hersz! Hersz! my

Hersz! He is my Kleineskind, the most precious jewel in the crown of grand, and great grandchildren, for he is like my husband Hersz!' And now when old age has sealed her lips and she scarcely knows anybody, she still recognizes him and opens her lips for him because he is like her husband."

"The spirit of Michael went into the body of Hersz and now lives in the body of Meir; it is a proud and rebellious spirit, without humility and reverence:" said the rabbi; but seemingly softened by Saul's submissive acquiescence, he added,—

"Why do you not marry him, since his face is covered with hair?"

"Rabbi! I wanted to give him for a wife, the pious Jankiel's daughter, but the child threw himself at my feet and begged me not to force him into the marriage."

"Why did you not put your foot upon his neck and make him obey you?"

Saul bent his head in silence. He acknowledged his guilt. Love for the orphaned grandson was leading him into sin continually.

Todros again took the word,—

"Marry him without delay, for it is written: when hair beginneth to grow upon the man's face and he be not married, his soul will fall into impurity. The soul of your grandson is already tinged with impurity; I saw him yesterday alone with a girl."

Saul raised his troubled, questioning eyes to the speaker.

"I have seen him," continued the rabbi, "on the meadows with Abel Karaim's granddaughter."

"With the Karaim's granddaughter?" repeated Saul in a voice of horror and amazement.

"He stood on the verge of the pond and she gave him flowers; I read in their faces the impure fire within their souls."

"With the Karaim's daughter?" repeated Saul, bewildered.

"With a heretic," said the rabbi, impressively.

"A beggar-girl," said Saul, and raised his head energetically.

"Rabbi, I shall deal with him differently. He must not be allowed to bring shame upon my house, through consorting with a beggar girl. I will marry him.

"You must punish him," exclaimed the rabbi. "I came on purpose to bid you put your foot upon his neck and break his stubborn spirit. Do not pity him; your yielding to him is a sin, unpardonable in the eyes of the Lord. If you do not punish him, I will bring my right hand down and crush him like a worm, and then it will bring great contumely upon your house."

Saul trembled at these words. His heart was torn by many conflicting feelings, a secret dislike for the rabbi and great reverence for his learning; anger towards his grandson and a great love for him. The rabbi's threat worked upon the last of the feelings.

"Rabbi," he said entreatingly, "forgive him once more, he is only a child. When he is married and in business for himself he will be quite different. When he was born his father asked what name he was to give the boy, and I wrote back, 'Let his name be Meir,' which means the light, 'let him be the light of our house and of Israel.'"

He could not proceed, his voice broke, and two big tears coursed down the furrowed face.

The rabbi rose, and lifting his forefinger in admonition, "Remember what I said about putting your foot upon his neck and obey my orders; for it is written, 'The wise men are the salt of the earth.' Saying these last words,' he moved towards the door, where Rebe Jankiel and Moreine Kalman stood awaiting him. They carried him across the passage into the street, and the same procession preceded by the acrobatic motions of the melamed, copied at a distance by his scholars, moved back whence it had come. Saul, his face buried in his hands, remained motionless and silent in the sitting-room, when the door opened and Freida stood on the threshold. Her eyes wandered slowly around the room and in her tuneless whisper, she asked :—

"Where is Meir?"

CHAPTER V.

MEIR was not at home during the rabbi's visit. He had left home early in the morning and directed his steps toward a street farthest from the centre of the town. It was a street of low, narrow houses that boasted of no more than two small windows at the most; heaps of refuse and pools of stagnant water made the air heavy and evil smelling. Tiny threads of smoke issued from the blackened chimneys, and betrayed the scanty meals prepared within; here and there half-rotten palings surrounded a yard or tiny plot of garden with a few starved vegetable plants. Some women with lean and sad faces in blue caftans and faded wigs, were washing their coarse linen on the doorsteps, old women were knitting, and young girls in dirty rags and dishevelled hair milked the goats. In this part of the town lived the poorer classes; it was the abode of poverty, misery, and disease.

The houses of Ezofovitch, Kalman, Witebski, and Kamionker, upon the central square, were palaces in comparison with them. There lived the merchants and the learned class, the aristocracy of all Jewish communities; here lived the artisans who could not boast of ancestors or students in their families, but lived from hand to mouth by what they could earn.

Though early in the day one could see through the dull windows the busy hands of tailors and shoemakers. The noise of tinkers and blacksmiths came through the thin walls, and the presence of tallow-candle manufacturers made itself distinctly felt. Some of the inhabitants made the most of the few rays of sun and opened their windows, and the passer-by could see the tiny room blackened by smoke and dust, filled with people who almost touched the beams of the ceiling with their heads. Loud prayers came from some of the windows, mingled with shrill female voices and squalling children. The children which could move about by themselves were all in the street, dressed in short jackets without sleeves; they were playing, shouting and running about; the elder boys dressed in long gray garments, stood listlessly against the walls of the houses staring vacantly into space. Meir approached one of these boys.

"Leibele," he said, "I have come to see whether you are any better, and here I find you blinking like an owl at the sun."

That Leibele was ill seemed evident, the child looked at Meir absently and drew his scanty garments close round his trembling limbs.

Meir put his hand upon the child's head.

"Did you go to school yesterday?"

The boy trembled still more, and in a hoarse voice, said,—

"Aha."

That meant yes.

"Did you get flogged again?"

Tears started into the boy's eyes.

"Yes," he said with a low sob.

"Have you had any breakfast ?"

The child shook his head.

Meir went to the nearest stall and bought a huge bun and gave it to him. Leibele took it in both hands and greedily devoured it ; at the same moment, a tall, wiry man rushed out of the house and grasped Meir's hand, which he kissed fervently, and then began to reproach him.

"Moreine, why did you give him a bun, he does not deserve even your looking at him. He is a stupid, obstinate child, that will not learn and brings shame upon us. The melamed, may he live a hundred years, works hard to enlighten him. He flogs him at school, I flog him at home to drive the lessons in, and all to no purpose ; he is an idle, good-for-nothing donkey.

Meir looked at the boy, who was still eating.

"Izmul," he said, "he is not idle or obstinate, he is ill."

Izmul waved his hand scornfully.

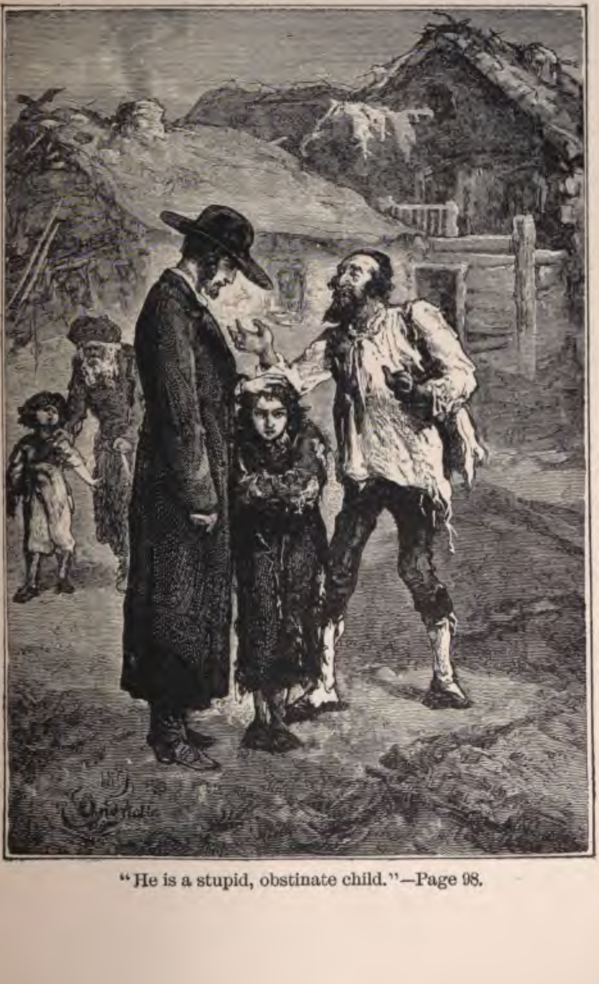
"Ill ? he only began to be ill when he was sent to school. Ah ! what a pretty clever lad he was ! look what he is now, who could have expected such a misfortune ?"

Meir still patted the shaggy mane of the idiotic-looking child, when Ismul again bent himself in two and kissed Meir's hand.

"Moreine," he said, "you are very good to pity that stupid child."

"Why do you call me moreine, Ismul ?" began Meir.

Samuel interrupted quickly.



"He is a stupid, obstinate child."—Page 98.

"Your forefathers were moreine, so are your grandfather and uncles, and you, Meir, will be moreine very soon."

Meir shook his head with a queer smile and said:

"Ismul! I shall never be moreine, they will not bestow that title upon me, and I—I do not wish for it."

Ismul thought a while, and then said hesitatingly:

"I have heard you are not on good terms with the rabbi and the Cahala."

Meir looked around as if he wanted to take in the whole picture of the sordid surroundings.

"How very poor you are," was his only answer to Ismul's remark.

His words had touched a sore spot. Ismul's whole frame trembled and his eyes were burning.

"Ah! and how poor we are, and the poorest of all that live in this street, is the chayet (tailor) Ismul. He has a blind mother, a wife and eight children, and only two hands to support them with," and he stretched out his hands, the hands of a miserable outcast, so lean and dirty, and scarred with marks of needles and scissors. "Moreine!" he said in a low voice, bending towards the young man, "it is difficult to live, everything is so dear. We pay government taxes for the meat we eat, for the tallow-candles we burn, we pay to the funeral club, to the Cahala, and for these miserable houses; where can we get the moneys from? It is our blood and sweat pays for it. You asked me once why it was we were so dirty in our house, why the wife was looking so thin and old, though still young in years; and why the children were always ill. Moreine, we have no money to pay for 'koscher' meat, and never buy any, but live on bread and raw onions. On the Sabbath, we only had fish when you gave me some silver coins to buy it with. We are all poor in this part of the town, but the poorest of all is the chayet (tailor) Ismul, with his blind mother, his wife and eight children."

He shook his head sorrowfully, and looked at Meir, with large eyes, that seemed to wonder at the contemplation of his own misery.

Meir, with his hand still on the child's head, looked pityingly at the tailor, but his brow was contracted as if in pain or anger.

"Ismul," he said softly, "how is it you are so often out of work?"

Ismul looked somewhat disconcerted, and pushed his cap at the back of his head.

"I will tell you," continued Meir, "why you get little work. You cut pieces from the stuff they entrust you with and use it for yourself."

Ismul grasped his forehead with both hands.

"Oh, my poor head," he moaned, "moreine, your lips have uttered ugly words."

He jumped into the air, bent down to the ground, then jumped again, and exclaimed excitedly:

"I will open my heart before you, moreine. I did take pieces of the cloth; but why did I do it? It was to cover my naked children; my mother was ill, I sold it to buy meat for her. Moreine, let not your eyes dwell upon poor Ismul in anger. If I were rich like Reb Jankiel, or Moreine Kalman, if I had all the money they get from us, I would not—steal."

"And why do Reb Jankeil and Moreine Kalman take your money?" said Meir absently.

"Nay! they are in the right, they are the Elders, and what they do must be right. Whosoever obeys them obeys the Lord."

A sad smile flitted over Meir's features and he put his hands into his pocket. Ismul followed the movement with greedy, glittering eyes.

Meir put some silver coins upon the window-sill, and Ismul kissed his hand fervently.

"You are good, moreine, good to all poor people, even to that stupid child of mine." Here he paused, and coming a step nearer, he almost whispered into Meir's ear:

"You are good, and the grandson of a great man. Who am I? only a poor tailor, but I must bare my heart before you. You are doing wrong, by opposing the rabbi and the Cahala. Our rabbi is a great man, to whom the Lord reveals great things. Even the birds obey him; he can heal diseases and read the people's inmost thoughts. The very breath of his mouth is holy, and when he prays, his soul is embracing the Lord himself. And you, moreine, have turned your heart from him."

The poor tailor spoke with deep earnestness, and raised his finger to emphasize his words.

"And the Cahala," he continued, "is composed of pious and wealthy people. We are bound to respect and obey them; even if they do wrong, we ought to shut our eyes and not notice it. They will accuse you before the Lord and before the people. God's anger will come down upon you, and the people will say you are rash and turn away from you."

It would be difficult to say what impression Ismul's earnest, and at the same time humble admonition, made upon the young man. His hand still rested on the child's head, he looked at the wasted, pretty face as if he saw in the trembling, idiotic boy, the image of Israel, eaten up by poverty and disease, but still believing and blindly submissive.

He nodded in a friendly manner to the tailor and moved away. Ismul ran after him a few steps.

"Moreine!" he called in a voice full of anguish, "do not be angry with me because I opened my heart to you; and oh, be wise and do not let them accuse you before the Lord and the people. Better to be buried fathoms deep than to feel their angry hand upon you."

He retreated to his hut without noticing that Leibele had disappeared. With his hands tucked under his miserable garments, the child followed the young man as far as the end of the street, then hesitated, as if not daring to go further, and in a hoarse voice, called out:

"Moreine!"

Meir looked round and smiled at the child, which had followed him. Leibele stared with meaningless eyes at him and then stretched forth a thin little hand and said:

"Another bun."

Meir looked for a stall. Along the street, stalls were not wanting, where pale and thin-looking women, sold buns hard as stones, onions, and black, sticky balls, made from honey and poppy-seed. He picked out a bun and handed it to the child, who raised it to his mouth with both hands, turned round and walked straight back.

When Meir entered into the large square, it seemed to him as if he had emerged from an abyss of darkness into daylight again. The sun shone bright and reflected gayly in the many windows. The pious Jankeil was surveying the erection of a new building, with an expression of great satisfaction. A little further on stood Moreine Kalman in his porch, shining in satin garments, holding a cigar in one hand, and with the other, patting a two-year old child who raised its dimpled face to him.

In the courtyard of Ezofovitch, there was life, and noise, and bustle. Two strong men were sawing trees for firewood, the children played around with sticks and branches, a bright servant-girl carrying water from the well, conversed with the workmen; through the open windows the two heads of Abram and Rafael were visible, bending over their account books. Sara standing before the kitchen hearth, and pretty Lia plaiting her hair before the looking-glass.

CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Meir entered the courtyard the men interrupted their work and nodded, smilingly. They came from the same poor street he had just left, and knew him well.

"Sholem Aleichem," (peace be with you,) they called out.

"Aleichem Sholem," gayly answered Meir.

"Will you not help us at our work?" said one of them, pleasantly.

"Why not?" said Meir, and drew nearer. He liked the exercise, and the men were used to see him share their work and liked to work with him. They were just making room for him when Lia's face appeared at the window.

"Meir! Meir! where have you been. Zeide has been calling for you."

It was scarcely half an hour since the rabbi had left, and old Saul with his head buried in his hands, was deeply thinking.

Near the window sat Freida, dozing in the sun.

A curious train of thoughts was occupying the mind of the hale old man. He, himself, had never fully realized the social position of his ancestor Michael or his father, Hersz: he knew they had been respected, not only by their own people, but also by the king and noblemen of the country, and he, Saul, was proud of their memory.

He dimly understood that some wrong had been inflicted on these same members of his family, by the house of Todros, hence the antagonism between their two houses. Being proud of his wealth and well-kept house, he secretly despised Todros for his poverty and dirtiness; but all this was nothing compared to the unbounded reverence he had for learning, and Todros was to him the very emblem of sacred wisdom. He himself often studied the sacred books, but his mind, so clear for practical purposes, could not follow its intricate windings, and the less he understood, the more he reverenced it, and the greater became his feeling of humility and holy awe. This very humility and religious terror made him now very wroth with his grandson.

"What does he do it for? What earthly use is it to him?" thought Saul, and looked angrily at his grandson.

Meir entered timidly. He knew the rabbi had been there and guessed only too well the purport of his visit. He did not like to rouse his grandfather's anger, still less to grieve him.

"Come nearer," called the old man, "nice stories about you have reached my ears," and fixing his angry eyes upon the youth, he said,—

"Consider yourself pledged to Jankiel Kamionker's daughter; in two months' time you will be married."

A long silence followed. It was Meir who interrupted it.

"Zeide," he said, in a low but determined voice, "I will not marry Kamionker's daughter."

"Why?" asked Saul, suppressing his rising anger.

"Because Kamionker is a bad man, zeide, and I will not enter into any relationship with him."

Saul could not contain himself any longer, and soundly rated his grandson for his presumption, in judging his elders, and praised Reb Jankiel's piousness.

"Zeide," he interrupted, "he wrongs poor people."

"And what business is that of yours?" shouted the old man.

Meir's eyes kindled.

"Zeide," he exclaimed, "he lives upon the sweat and work of the poor people that live at the other end of the town; through him they become thieves, their children starve and go naked, and he builds new houses. And in those inns he rents from the landowners, strange things are going on. His innkeepers make the ignorant people drunk; he distils more spirits than allowed by government. Zeide! do not judge by his prayers, judge by his deeds; for it is written, Your prayers I will not, nor your burnt offerings, but whosoever oppresses the poor, offendeth the Lord."

Saul was very angry, but the quotation of his grandson somewhat smoothed his ruffled spirit, as he wanted to see him conversant with the holy writings.

"Bah! what does it matter to us if Jankiel makes the peasants drunk or distils more spirit than allowed. You know nothing about business. When you marry his daughter and become his partner, you will do the same.

"Zeide," replied Meir quietly, "I shall never distil or sell spirits. I have no liking for it:"

"Then what have you a liking for; it seems to me you have no liking for anything," growled the old man.

He had scarcely finished when Meir bent down and embraced the old man's knees.

"Zeide! let me go forth into the world and study. I asked you the same two years ago, and you were angry and bade me stay at home. I remained, Zeide, because I love and respect you, and your will is my law. Let me go now. If I go with your consent and blessing, I shall gather knowledge which will enable me to stand up against the rabbi. I shall know, then, how to deal with him. Now ——"

Saul did not allow him to proceed and called out, "Hush!"

The very thought of his grandson rising against the rabbi filled him with horror.

But Meir drew himself up, and with glowing eyes, continued,—

"Zeide! remember the story of Rabbi Eleazar. When he was young his father would not let him go out into the world, and bade him till the soil; he tilled the soil, but his heart was full of unspeakable longing; and so it is with me. But he could not bear it and fled from his father's house. He went to Jerusalem unto a wise man and said to him, "Let me be your disciple, and be you my teacher." When, some years later, his father, Hyrcanos of name, came to Jerusalem, he saw a youth who stood high above the people on the market-place, and the people listened to his words which flowed like honey from his lips, and all the heads bowed before him, and the people called out as in one voice, 'He is our Master.' Hyrcanos wondered much at the wise words that came from the youth, and at the love the people bore him. He asked a man who stood near him, 'Who is the youth who stands there above the people, and who is his father, that I may go and bow before him, because he has brought forth such a son."

The man to whom he spake thus, answered, The name of the youth is Eleazer, the star upon Israel's head, and his father's name is Hyrcanos.

When Hyrcanos heard this he called aloud and went to the youth, to whom he opened his arms. And there was great joy in the hearts of father and son, and the people honored Hyrcanos as the father of so great a son.

Saul listened attentively with a much brighter expression. Dear to him were the traditions of his race, and more so when they came from the lips of his favorite grandson. Yet it did not make him waver in his purpose.

"If sages were to be found in Jerusalem, I should send you there, without your asking. But the right hand of the Lord lies heavy upon Jerusalem . . . it does not belong to us, it will be ours again in time, when the Messiah comes. The Israelite yearns to lay his bones there, but not to live there. I will not send you to strangers; their knowledge is not necessary to the Israelite. You have learned as much as you want for business purposes from the Edomite, and for this, even, I had to bear reproaches from the rabbi. These reproaches are a shame and grief to me, though he is a great and wise man, yet my soul suffers when he comes to my house, to scold me, as the melamed scolds his boys at school."

His brow had become clouded and angry. Meir stood as if turned to stone, but his eyes were full of sadness and rebellion. "Zeide," he said at last, "let me be a working man. I will go and live with the poor people, work with them and guard them from evil, and when they have no bread, I will share my own with them," and his eyes looked bright with unshed tears.

Saul looked at him a while in speechless amazement.

"When you are a few years older," he said at last, "you will see yourself what silly things you have been saying. There never has been a working man in our family, thanks to the Lord, and there never will be. We have been merchants from father to son, and you shall be a merchant."

These last words he said with great decision, and then in a gentler tone proceeded,—

"I will be lenient towards you; if you do not wish to marry Reb Jankiel's daughter, I will not force you. I shall betroth you to Eli Witebski, the great merchant's daughter. You wish for education, well, you shall have an educated wife; she is at a boarding-school at Wilna, speaks French and plays upon the piano. Since you are so fanciful, this will be the right wife for you. She is sixteen years old. Her father gives her a substantial dowry, and to you a share in his business."

There was an evident struggle in Meir's expression.

"I do not know Witebski's daughter, I have never seen her," he said, gloomily.

"And for what reason should you want to see her? I give her to you," shouted Saul. "She comes back in four weeks, and two months hence you shall marry her. This is my last word and command. I have been far too indulgent with you, but it will be different now. Isaac Todros told me to put my foot upon your neck."

All the blood rushed into Meir's face and his eyes gleamed.

"Let Rabbi Todros put his foot upon the neck of those who lick the dust from his feet," he exclaimed. "I am an Israelite, as good as he, *I am the slave of no one.* I. . ."

The words died on his quivering lips because Saul, erect and with blazing eyes, had raised his old but still powerful arm. But it did not come down, because suddenly a small wrinkled hand came between them and laid itself protectingly upon Meir's breast. It was Freida's, who had been roused by the angry voices of the men from her somnolent attitude near the window.

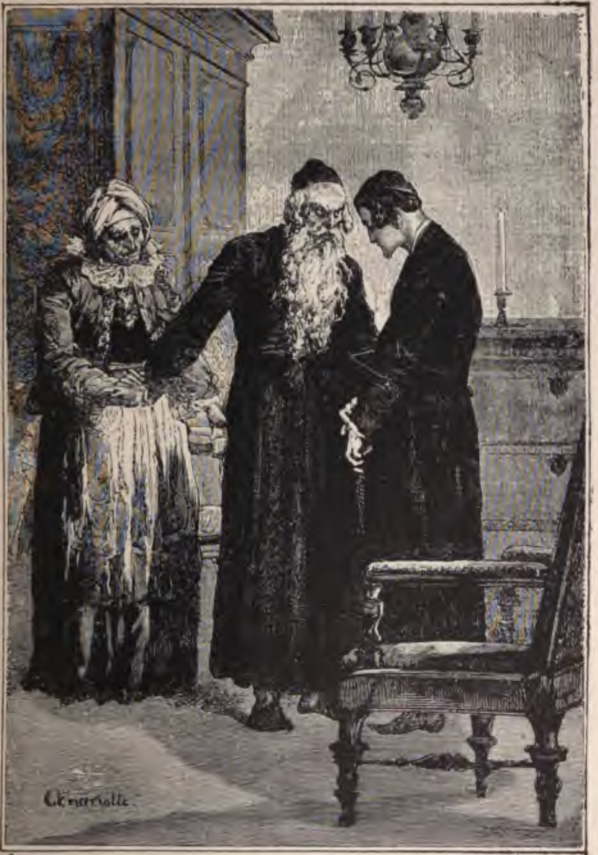
Saul's arm fell powerless to his side, and in a softened voice he said,—

"Off with you!"

The great grandmother went back to her seat and Meir left the room. His head sank upon his breast and his brow clouded, he chafed at the chain of patriarchal authority which he could not shake off; but the remembrance of the dear old hand which had shielded him just now, brought a tender smile upon his lips; it was also a smile of hope.

"If I only could get those writings," he murmured.

He pondered over this legacy from Michael Senior to his descendants of which the great grandmother knew the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"I am the slave of no one."—Page 110.

hiding-place; if he could discover it he might know how to act.

Saul, heavily breathing, had sunk back on his seat. Now and then he looked at his mother reverently. It seemed to him almost a miracle, that the mute centenarian should have roused herself in order to defend her great grandchild; perhaps he felt grateful that she had stayed his hand from violence towards his orphaned grandson.

"Rafael!" he called out, after a while.

A tall, grayhaired man came into the room; he was the eldest, had already grandsons and was at the head of a large business. As soon as he heard his father's voice, he left his occupation and interrupted the conference with his brother.

"Is Eli Witebski at home?" asked Saul.

"He came back from a long journey yesterday, and is resting at home," answered the son.

"Let somebody go to him at once and tell him to come here, as I have some business to talk over with him."

"I will go myself," said Rafael; "I know what you want from him, and it ought to be attended to at once. Meir will be in a bad way if he does not marry soon and set up in business for himself."

Saul looked at his son with troubled eyes.

"Do you think, Rafael, that marriage will change him?"

Rafael nodded.

"No doubt it will. Remember Ber; he was going on in the same way as Meir, but when he married our sister Sara, and you, father, gave him a share in the business, and children were born to him, all those foolish fancies went clear out of his head."

"Go and bring Witebski to me at once," said Saul, energetically.

Rafael shortly afterward emerged from the door and went towards a large house situated at the junction of two of the principal streets. In the porch, reached by a flight of steps, sat a stoutish woman of about forty, very comely looking still, and by the expression of her face, well satisfied with herself. She was dressed in silk and wore a quantity of gold ornaments. She raised herself when she saw Rafael ascending the steps, and made an elaborate bow, such as was seldom seen in Szybow town, and put her hand out to welcome the visitor. Women did not shake hands with men in this part of the world, and the newfangled mode of greeting did not seem to the taste of the sedate Rafael, as he slightly touched the pudgy hand and asked whether her husband were at home.

"Yes, he came home yesterday, and is resting now."

"I came to speak with him," said Rafael.

"Please come in," said the woman, smiling complacently; "he will be very glad to see you."

Rafael only nodded in reply to this polite speech, and disappeared within the house.

Mistress Hana sat down again, murmuring to herself, "Ugh! what a nation! They are downright bears and savages, and do not know how to address a lady."

She sighed and shook her head.

"It isn't what I was brought up to. At home, in Wilna, they are polite and educated, not like these," and she sniffed disdainfully, then resumed her crochet-work and the inspection of the passers-by.

Presently the door opened again, and the two men volubly talking together, crossed the porch without taking any notice of the woman and went towards Ezofovitch's house.

Eli Witebski was not as tall as his companion, with whom he crossed the square, and he presented an altogether different type in character, as well as in appearance. His coat was much shorter than Rafael's, and of a different shape. On his satin waistcoat a massive gold chain was visible, and on the hand with which he was wont to caress his short, auburn beard, glittered a big diamond. He walked at Rafael's side with great alacrity, evidently eager to respond to Saul's call, and there was not a merchant in or about Szybow who would not have done the same. For ten years Saul had left off doing business on his own account, and never went beyond his house, except to the synagogue. All those who wanted advice or help from him, came to his house. Very often the old-fashioned sofa, where he sat with the sacred books before him, would be surrounded by grave men who came to consult him about some knotty point of business, or wanted his arbitration in some dispute. He shrewdly advised, and helped as far as he could do so without injuring his own family. When he wanted any of them upon his own account, he never hesitated to send for them.

The elegant and smiling merchant entered the room and greeted its owner,—

"Sholom Alieehem!" (peace be with you.)

He never used that old-fashioned greeting anywhere out of Szybow, but his principles were to adapt himself to those with whom he lived.

Rafael wanted to leave the room, but his father made him a sign to stay. They carefully closed the doors, and began to converse in low tones. However low their voices were pitched, a few sentences reached the ear of pretty Lia, Rafael's daughter, whose inquisitive face was close to the keyhole. She heard the names of Meir and Witebski's daughter Mera coupled together. Then she heard her own name and that of Leopold, Mistress Hana's nephew. After that she blushed a rosy red and left the keyhole in some confusion, but not displeased, and stationed herself near the window to watch for the return of her cousin Meir. The sun was already setting when Witebski left the house, his face looked radiant and well satisfied with the result of the family consultation.

Shortly after he had gone, Meir came in. Lia rushed out to meet him, and, throwing her arms round his neck, whispered: "Oh, Meir! I have such news for you. Zeide and father had a long talk with Eli Witebski, and it was about us two. Witebski has promised to you his daughter Mera, and zeide and father promised my hand to Leopold, Mistress Hana's nephew, who lives in the world and is an educated man." She blushed again and dropped her eyes shyly. Meir loosened her arms gently, and when she raised her eyes he was half-way through the gate already.

"Meir!" called the girl after him, "where are you *going? Will* you not come in for supper?"

The young man did not answer, and walked on very fast. He came to understand now the hollowness of his remark a few hours ago: "I am the slave of no one!" They had disposed of his whole life, without so much as consulting him. His whole soul rose in revolt against their resolution. Why that indignation? He did not even know the girl Mera, who was acquiring somewhere the very knowledge he was so wishful for. He walked on and on till he had left the town behind, and found himself near the Karaite's hill.

CHAPTER VII.

THERE was a yellow, flickering light in the window of the little hut at the foot of the hill. The stars twinkled over the branches of the pear-tree, and the evening shadows spreading along the fields.

Inside the hut, on a heap of crusted straw, sat an old man who with trembling fingers picked out long stalks of osier. His figure looked like a gray outline on a dark background, his features were invisible. Near the yellow, flickering candle, sat a girl, spinning wool.

"In midst of the desert, so vast that it seemed without end, were two mountains, whose summits were lost within the clouds. These mountains were Horeb and Sinai—"

Here the quavering voice broke off and the girl, who listened intently whilst spinning, said,—

"Go on, zeide!"

But at the same moment from under the open window a voice called softly,—

"Golda!"

The spinning girl seemed neither startled nor astonished at the voice. She seemed to have expected it, so quietly she went to the window; only her eyes had grown more luminous and there was a tender note in her voice when she said,—

"Meir. I knew you would keep your promise!"

"I came to you, Golda," said a low masculine voice, "because darkness is closing around me, and my heart is sad."

"Why is it sad, Meir?"

"I am in great trouble. Rabbi Isaac has accused me before the zeide, and zeide wants me to marry."

The girl remained steady; not a movement of her face or body betrayed the sudden shock, but she had grown very, very pale.

"Whom does he want you to marry?"

"Mera, the merchant Witebski's daughter."

Golda shook her head

"I do not know her," and then she suddenly asked,—

"Will you marry her, Meir?"

The young man did not answer, neither did the girl repeat the question; a deep blush slowly mounted up to her brow and a look of happiness filled her eyes, which met those of Meir. There was no need for words. This deep silence was interrupted by the quavering voice of the old man,—

"When Moses descended from Mount Sinai, the thunder grew silent, the lightning went out and the wind fell; and Israel rose like one man and called aloud, Moses, repeat to us the words of the Eternal."

Meir listened attentively to the voice reciting the old, old history of Israel. Golda looked round at her grandfather.

"He always tells stories and I spin or sit at his feet and listen."

"Meir!" she added, in her earnest voice, "come into the house and speak to my grandfather!"

When after a few minutes the door opened gently, Abel, sitting among the osier branches and busy plaiting, raised his head and perceived the dim outline of the young man in the door.

"Who is that?" he asked.

"Zeide," said Golda "Meir Ezofovitch, the grandson of the wealthy Saul, has come to see you."

At the sound of that name, the old man rose slowly from the heap of straw and osier branches and his face became visible in the flickering light. There was not much of it, as it was nearly all covered with snow-white hair. Golda had spoken truly when she said her grandfather's hair was white as snow from age and his eyes like corals from weeping. These same faded eyes looked now at the intruder, first with an expression of terror, which suddenly changed into one of anger and hatred.

"Ezofovitch," said the old man, in a voice less quavering and hoarse, than before. "Why did you cross my threshold, you, a Rabbinist, a foe, a persecutor? Your ancestor cursed my fathers and burned their temple. Go forth and let my old eyes not be poisoned by your presence!"

Saying this he raised his emaciated hand and pointed to the door.

Meir came slowly nearer, and bowing low before the angry old man said,—

"Peace be with you."

At the sound of the sweet voice and the words which contained a blessing and a prayer for peace, the old man grew silent and sat down on his former place. After a while, in a less angry but rather sorrowful voice, he said,—

"Why did you come here? You are a Rabbinist, a descendant of the mighty Senior. They will excommunicate you for coming here to my house, for I am the last of the Karaites, who remained here to guard the ruins of the temple and the ashes of my forefathers. I am a wretched outcast, cursed by your people; I am the last of the Karaites."

Meir listened respectfully to the words of the old man.

"Rebe!" he said "I came to you in order that justice might be done. The descendant of him who cursed your forefathers bends low before the descendant of the wronged people."

Abel Karaim seemed to drink in the words, over which he pondered in silence.

At last he whispered,—

"Peace be with you."

Golda stood with her hands crossed over her breast and looked at Meir, as pilgrims look at the holy shrine. When she heard the peaceful words of the grandfather, she offered a seat to the young man, and taking a bright pitcher in her hand went into the entrance. Meir sat down opposite the old man, who had taken up his work and was murmuring to himself. By degrees his voice grew louder, and more quavering.

It was Abel's occupation to tell stories, his head and heart were full of them, and they brightened his miserable life.

Meir did not catch the first sentences until his voice grew louder,—

"By the rivers of Babylon they sat and wêpt, and the wind wept in the strings of their harps which they had brought from their land and hanged upon the willow-trees. And strangers came to them and said, 'Take down your harps and play and sing to us the songs of Zion.' And they answered: 'How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land, when our mouth is dried up in great bitterness. And the men said again, 'Play and sing to us.' And the prophets said to each other: 'How shall we withstand their tortures and make our right hand forget its cunning?' And when the day after the strangers returned, and said, 'Play unto us and sing.' The prophets raised their blood-stained hands and cried out, 'How can we take down the harps when our hands are cut in two and we have no fingers!'

"The rivers of Babylon murmured louder in great wonder, and the wind moaned within the harps that hung upon the willow-trees, for the prophets of Israel had cut their hands in two, so that they should not be forced to sing and play in captivity!"

When Abel had finished the last words of this old legend, Golda entered the room. In one hand she carried a plaited mat with two earthenware cups, in the other a pitcher full of foaming milk. In the open door stood the white goat, sharply defined upon the dark shadow of the lobby. The girl in the faded gown and gracefully poised head, poured the milk into the cups and handed one to the old man and the other to Meir. She moved silently about the little room, a dreamy smile upon her lips, and then sat down and began to spin. Perfect silence prevailed around. Old Abel in a low whisper commenced one of his stories; but his head sank upon his breast and his hand lay motionless on the osier branches. The goat disappeared from the threshold, she made a slight rustle in the lobby and then everything was quiet. The young people were alone with the sleeping old man and the stars, which twinkled through the window. She was spinning, and her eyes looked at the young man, who was deep in thought.

"Golda!" he said at last, "the prophets who cut their hands so as not to sing and play in captivity, were great men!"

"They did not want to do anything against their conscience," said the girl earnestly.

They were again silent. The spindle in Golda's hands moved slower and more silently. Through the chinks in the wall, the evening breeze entered and made the light flicker.

"Golda!" said Meir, "are you not afraid to be alone at nights, when the autumn and the winter's darkness is around and the wind howls and whistles through the walls."

"No," replied the girl, "I am not afraid, for the Lord protects poor, lonely huts; and when the wind howls I listen to zeide's beautiful stories and do not heed it."

Meir's eyes, full of sympathy and pity, looked at the child.

"Golda!" said Meir again, "do you remember the story of Rabbi Akiba?"

"I shall not forget it through all my life," she replied.

"Golda! could you, like Rachel, wait fourteen years?"

"I could wait all my life," she said simply; but the spindle slipped from her trembling hands.

"Meir!" she said in a low voice, "promise me one thing. Whenever you feel sad in your grandfather's house, come to us; let me know you are sad and zeide shall comfort you with his beautiful stories."

"Golda!" he said in a powerful voice, "I, like the prophets of Israel, will cut my hands sooner than act against my conscience."

Saying this, he got up, and bending his head he said,—

"Peace be with you!"

"Peace be with you!" replied the girl in a low voice.

After he had left the hut, the girl extinguished the candle, wrapped herself up in a gray blanket and lay down upon the straw at the feet of her grandfather. Not to sleep yet, because her eyes looked for a long while at the stars which twinkled through the window.

CHAPTER VIII.

Eli Witebski possessed to a great extent the gift of diplomacy. Unlike all the other inhabitants of the town he had neither been born nor brought up there; business and other family affairs had induced him to take up his abode in Szybow, where he came as a stranger amongst people who had known each other for generations. Besides this drawback, Eli, who had formerly lived in a large town, had the disadvantage to be different from the other inhabitants, his coat was much shorter, so was his beard, and he wore a gold chain and diamond ring; his wife was unlike all the other wives in town, his daughter was at a boarding school, and besides her he had only two other children for his whole family. In the usual course of things any of these new-fangled notions would have been sufficient to set public opinion against him.

But it did not. There was a little muttering against him in the beginning, they called him misnagdim, progressist, indifferentist, but the murmurs gradually died away, owing to the genial manners and subtle tact of the merchant. He was always polite, gave way to everybody, acknowledged everything, and kept carefully aloof from people engaged in discussions or quarrels, so as not to be obliged to take either side; when he could not avoid it, he spoke so persuasively and guardedly that as often as not he reconciled the differing parties and earned the gratitude of both sides. As to the manifold customs and religious ceremonies, he was strictly orthodox. He kept the Sabbath and observed all the restrictions as to food. Whenever he met the great rabbi, he bowed low before him, and achieved a greater success than anybody else, for he made the gloomy ascetic smile ; he had always some anecdotes and clever speeches at hand, with a mystic or patriotic flavor, which pleased the most austere of his listeners. He did not spend much time at home, but mostly travelled about his business, but whenever he happened to be in town, never failed to make his appearance at Bet-ha Midrash, and listened attentively to Rabbi Todros' lessons and the learned discussions upon the commentaries of the Hagada, Gemara, and Halacha.

He was always found at the synagogue when others were there, and though he did not pray, like many others, with all the strength of lung and body, yet always preserved a reverential attitude.

We must not suppose that Witebski was a hypocrite, far from it, but he liked peace and did not wish to disturb either his own, or that of other people. Things had gone well with him in life, he was happy and contented, and liked people ; it was perfectly indifferent to him whether they were Talmudists, Cabalists, true-believers or heretics, even Edomites, provided they did not injure him personally. He had never heard of Edomites before he came to Szybow ; sometimes, when angry, he had spoken of them as goims,* but mostly called them simply Christians or

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* All who do not believe in the Jewish religion.

Catholics. When he heard them spoken of as Edomites, he shrugged his shoulders and thought, well ! let them be Edomites ; but he had no ill-feeling towards them, they had done him no harm, why should he not like them ? Out of Szybow, he knew a great many, and had a sincere liking for some ; but at Szybow he was a Szybowite.

He had received a religious education when young, but the bustle of the world had driven most of it out of his head. He sincerely believed in Jehovah, knew something about Moses and the captivity and modern Jewish history, but as to the deeper and subtler definitions, he knew absolutely nothing, and cared less. He did what the law commanded, saying to himself, " Maybe it is all the people's invention, but maybe they are the Lord's commands, why should I offend Him ?"

Thus diplomatizing with God and the world, he feared nothing, and everything prospered with him. His path would have been altogether smooth had he not brought with him that most astonishing product of civilization, his wife, Mistress Hana. However hard he tried to adapt himself to local customs, his wife wanted to subverse everything. Whilst living in a larger town, there had been entire harmony between these two, at Szybow, she was to him a source of continual trouble and apprehension. Mistress Hana adored civilization, which meant to her fine clothes, pretty furniture, the French language, polite intercourse with people, and music. She loved music. Whilst living in a large town, she frequented public concerts and walked about with her friends in rustling silk dresses, looked at the crowds and was perfectly happy.

Once she saw a fountain in a public park, at which she looked for hours in speechless delight, and when she returned to her own town, which did not boast of any such distinction, she told her friends about the splendid sight for a whole year.

Looking-glasses had a special attraction for her, and whenever she came near one, she looked complacently at her own reflection. As to the philosophy of life or religion, she knew even less than her husband. She believed in God, and in the depth of her heart was terribly afraid of Him ; she believed also in evil spirits, of whom she was still more afraid ; she also believed that he who could not see his shadow on the Sabbath night would surely die in the course of the year, and whosoever removed a candle from the Sabbath table brought ill-luck upon himself. On the other side, many things she did not believe in and called them vulgar superstitions. Being a careful housekeeper, she thought it would be better and cheaper if she could buy her meat from any ordinary butcher, and that the great amount of kitchen utensils kept by the true Israelite, was a troublesome custom. As to the law against wearing apparel of mixed textures, Mistress Hana shut her eyes and ears to all remonstrances and said they were cheaper and prettier.

She was horrified at the first sight of Szybow. No public gardens, no fountains, no society, or any trace of civilization. Oh, horror ! she took to her bed and lay between the feathers for two nights and days, crying and bewailing her fate and that of her children, who were to be left orphans, as she was sure to die. However, she did not die, and presently got up and began to unpack her furniture, arrange the house, and dress the children to show them to the natives, who never in their life had seen anything so beautiful. The children went out, were stared at and admired. This was the first crumb of comfort picked up by the exile from civilized worlds. By-and-by she picked up some more in a like manner. She astonished and amazed the inhabitants by her furniture, and her way of speaking, and whenever she became aware of it, she felt exquisitely happy. She was much happier than she ever had been before, had she but known it. In the world, she looked at civilization, was but a unit of the vast crowd, here she was civilization itself, the only one Szybow had ever known.

The astonishment of the people, which filled Hana's mind with joy, was a source of apprehension to her husband. He heard the mutterings of discontent. The public were shocked at his wife wearing mixed textures, of having the samovar (tea-urn) prepared on the Sabbath, and of having been heard to say that the inhabitants of Szybow were savages dwelling in caves. Eli began to declare war against his better half. The diplomatic husband, after a while, conquered as far as the samovar and mixed textures were concerned, but she would not retract her opinion about the natives of the town, and if she did not speak of them as savages, she could not help showing it in her manners.

Taking all in all, Mistress Hana was perfectly happy with her good-natured, though not always yielding, husband, her pretty, well-dressed children, and in the anticipation of the general astonishment her daughter Mera would excite in the town. Eli did not share these joyful anticipations, but was secretly afraid of what others would say of her.

CHAPTER IX.

THE great event had at last arrived. A month after the consultation in Saul's house, a party of five people were gathered in Mistress Hana's drawing-room, three women and two men. And it was no mean drawing-room. There was a sofa on springs covered with green rep, the only one in the whole town, chairs and easy-chairs to match, and a piano. The latter had seen better days, and betrayed very ancient worksmanship. It had been bought a year ago for Mera's exclusive use, and its arrival caused such a commotion in the little town as to fill the lady's heart with great pride. Curtains adorned the windows, and a few dusty cacti and straggling geraniums completed the arrangement. It happened once that one of the cacti came into flower, and Mistress Hana put it in the window, where the children in the street stared for hours at the great red blossom.

On the sofa sat the mistress of the house with her sister, a merchant's wife from Wilna, at whose house Mera had been staying whilst completing her education. She had accompanied the girl home, bringing at the same time her son Leopold. Like Mistress Hana, she was in silk and velvet, with a profusion of ornaments, but wore her own hair, instead of a wig. Opposite the sofa sat the head of the family and his wife's nephew Leopold. Mera, a pretty, fair-haired girl, moved restlessly about the piano; she would have liked to play, but did not dare to do so with her father's eye upon her. On the Sabbath playing is not allowed; neither is smoking. Nevertheless, Leopold, a handsome, slender youth of about twenty, indulged in cigarettes, the smoke of which curled above his head and wafted through the open window into the street. Eli rose and closed the window. A disdainful smile curled upon the young man's lips, Mera slightly shrugged her shoulders, and Mrs. Hana grew very red. On the table, upon a silver tray, stood wine, cakes and comfits, which, together with fish, fried the day before, had served them for dinner. Mistress Hana politely urged her guests to eat; but her sister was engaged in a far more absorbing occupation and paid no heed to her entreaties. She was investigating the contents of boxes lined with velvet, and drew forth, one after the other, bracelets, earrings and brooches set with diamonds and pearls. They were the betrothal gifts, which Saul had sent in his grandson's name the day after their arrival. For two days mother and aunt had feasted their eyes upon the jewels, though Leopold's mother felt inwardly ruffled that her son had brought nothing so beautiful for his future wife Lia.

"Well, she is a happy girl, and the Lord is good in giving her such a rich husband. But why does he not come to see her?" questioned the sister.

"Bah! they are uneducated people, and their custom is that engaged people do not see each other," replied Mrs. Hana scornfully.

"He is young and bashful," interpolated Eli.

Mera looked thoughtful, Leopold laughed aloud.

"I shall certainly not send any presents till I see the girl."

"Oh, you will see her fast enough," replied Eli; "we shall go to their house to-day."

"What kind of a girl is she?" asked Leopold's mother.

"Quite simple and uneducated," replied the sister.

"Her father Rafael gives fifteen thousand roubles with her," said Eli.

"Not much good that is to me. I cannot live upon the interest of fifteen thousand roubles," said Leopold, frowning.

"It is enough to give you a start in business."

"Business!" said the mother, shrilly; "my son has not been brought up to business. He has finished his education, and is now a government official. His salary is small as yet; but who knows to what high position he may not arrive."

Leopold raised his eyebrows and looked conscious of all the dignities his mother expected for him.

Eli smiled indulgently. "What does it matter," he thought, "that they talk nonsense; let them talk."

Presently Mera raised her pretty head and said to her cousin, "Cousin! comme c'est ennuyant ici?"

"Oui, cousine, cette vilaine petite ville est une place très ennuyante," he replied, puffing up his lips.

The mothers who did not understand a word looked at each other with a radiant smile, and Mistress Hana stretched her hand out and patted her daughter's head.

Even Eli's face, which bore the signs of inward misgivings, brightened up ; he rose and called out gayly,—

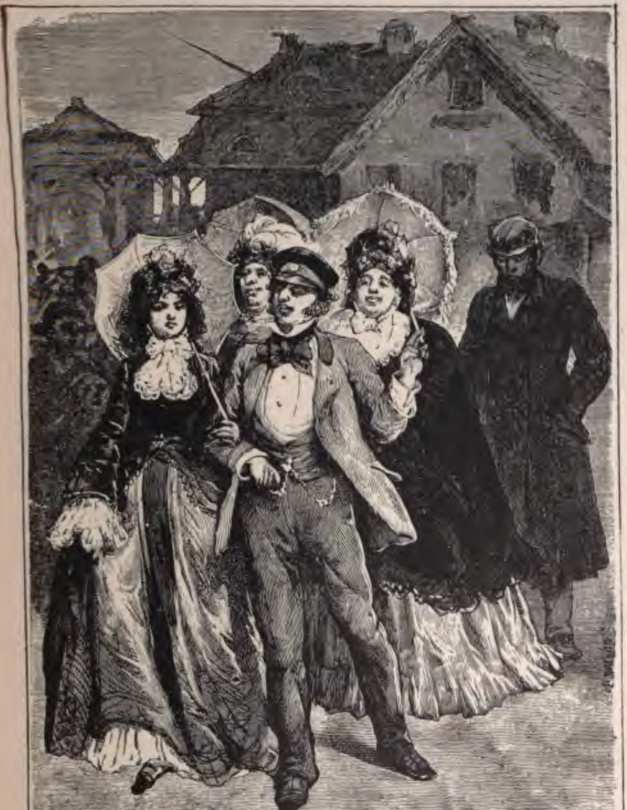
"It is about time for us to start !"

A few minutes later they all were ready to descend from the steps of the porch into the street. Eli again looked troubled. Nothing could be less orthodox than the dress of the young man, which consisted of a fashionable cutaway coat, a waistcoat displaying a great expanse of white linen and patent-leather boots. His head was covered with a cap bearing the government badge, a silver stripe, and a star in front. Before he left the house he had lit another cigarette. It was altogether against Eli's principles to find fault with anybody, especially with a guest under his own roof and the son and nephew of the two splendid women of whom he felt very proud. Upon entering into the porch, he looked at the street where people walked about in crowds and he could not help remonstrating.

"Listen, Leopold," he said, gently, "throw away that cigarette, people are stupid here, what is the use of rousing their ill feeling ? besides," he added "maybe the Lord forbids smoking on the Sabbath, who knows ?"

Leopold laughed.

"I am not afraid,' he said, and nimbly running down the steps, he offered his arm to Mera. The mothers followed, resplendent in their silks and flowery bonnets. Eli, his hands behind his back, brought up the rear. If attracting the attention of a crowd can be called a triumph, the passage across the square of Eli Witebski's family was indeed a triumphal march. A whole crowd of children of



"He offered his arm to Mera. The mothers followed."—Page 132.

all ages followed in their wake; their low exclamations increasing gradually to shouts and noise undescribable.

Some grown-up people swelled their ranks, whilst the more respectable families looked at the show from their porches. At the school door, stood the melamed in his usual garment and stared with wide-open eyes at the unusual sight. Leopold in his fashionable dress and cigarette between his lips, and Mera in her showy dress, bridling on his arm to show off her superior breeding were the cynosure of all eyes.

"See! see! the pretty young lady, the handsome gentleman," shouted the children.

"Who are they? Surely not Israelites," said some of the elder people, pointing at Leopold's cigarette.

"Misnagdin!" (sinner) suddenly somebody yelled in the crowd, and a small stone whizzed past Leopold's head. The young man changed color and threw the offensive cigarette away. Eli frowned. Mistress Hana drew herself up and said aloud to her sister,—

"We must make allowances for them, they are only low people." Leopold did not look as if he were inclined to make any allowances; his eyes still looked frightened and his lips were pressed close together when they entered into Ezofovitch's sitting-room.

There, in place of honor, sat old Saul surrounded by his numerous family. Near one of the windows sat the great grandmother, Meir stood leaning against the other. When the visitors entered the room, he only glanced at Mera, she did not interest him in the least, but his longing eyes rested upon Leopold. Him he wished to see and speak with, who had lived in the world and knew about all those things that occupied Meir's thoughts.

The noisy and effusive greetings lasted for some time. Saul did not leave his place, his daughter Sara, Ber's wife, did the honors of the house, offering refreshments to the visitors, loudly praising and admiring at the same time, the beauty of their dresses.

Mera sat down gracefully on the edge of a wooden chair near the timid, but delighted Lia, and stole now and then a look at the young man near the window, but without once meeting his eyes. Meir seemed to ignore her presence altogether, his whole attention fixed upon Leopold.

Mistress Hana entertained the company with a lively description of town pleasures, concerts, public gardens, and above all of the beautiful fountain, whilst her eyes were roaming about the room, which, with the massive table in the middle, its old-fashioned sofa and wooden chairs looked far better than Mistress Hana's tasteless arrangements. On one side of the wall there was a large bookcase with glazed doors full of old volumes, which had belonged to Michael Senior ; on the other, a glazed cupboard full of china surmounted by a huge samovar which shone like burnished gold. Mistress Hana reddened with vexation. A samovar in her future son-in-law's drawing-room ! it was against all her notions of propriety. Presently her eyes fell upon the dozing great grandmother, whose diamonds sparkled in all the colors of the rainbow, and the pearls glistened with a rosy sheen upon them.

She nudged her sister's arm.

"Look there," she whispered.

The merchantess from Wilna, half shut her eyes as if dazzled by the sight.

"Good Lord!" she called out, "what treasures! but what good are they upon an old woman, what use to her?"

Old Saul heard the exclamation and politely inclining his head towards his guests, he said,—

"She deserves to be shown the greatest respect and to be adorned with the most costly the house possesses; because we have sprung from her like the branches spring from a tree. He half shut his eyes and swaying his head gently, continued; she is very old now, but once was young and very beautiful."

"'Where is her beauty?' Years and months, like a flight of birds, have passed over her and plucked berry after berry from the tree once so stately, till none are left. Her face is wrinkled; but whence came those wrinkles? I know, for I see a picture in each of them. When I look at the wrinkles upon her eyelids, I remember my illness as a child, and she sitting near my bed night and day singing me to sleep, whilst tears streamed out of those eyes. When I see the wrinkles on her cheek, I think of her troubles as a widow, refusing to be married again, attending to the business herself and accumulating wealth for her children. In that deep furrow upon her forehead I see the deathbed of my father, and she, his wife, lying almost lifeless on the floor, not crying or weeping, but sighing softly: 'Hersz! Hersz! my Hersz!' This was the greatest grief she ever had in her life, hence the deepest furrow on her forehead."

Thus spoke old Saul, with his finger raised in emphasis and a pensive smile upon his colorless lips. The listening women shook their heads half sadly half sympathetically. Mistress Hana was so moved and entranced that tears hung upon her eyelashes, which she dried with a thin cambric handkerchief she was holding in her hand whilst she pressed Saul's hand with the other. "Thanks! thanks! thank you," she said with a grateful smile. "Thanks! repeated the others in subdued voices, amongst them, the merchant's wife from Wilna. "Ein kluger Mensch, ein ehrlicher Mensch!" (a wise man, an honest man!) they murmured.

Saul's simple tale of filial love had struck a sympathetic chord in all those present.

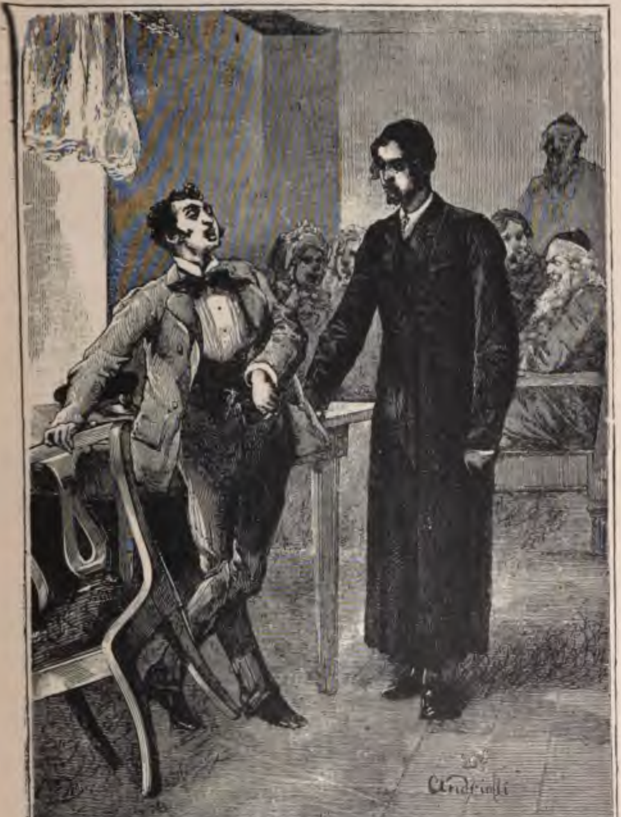
Only young Leopold, who had conversed with Mera in an undertone, looked bored and discontented. After a while he rose and approached the window, where Meir stood. The conversation round the old-fashioned sofa reverted to trivial topics again, Mistress Hana expressing her regret that her daughter Mera could not play to them, as there was no piano.

It was evident Leopold had not moved towards the window with the intention of making Meir's acquaintance, but from another motive revealed from his drawing forth his cigarette case. When Meir saw him approaching, he met him eagerly and stretching out his hand, said,—

"I am Meir, Saul's grandson, and have wished for a long time to meet you and talk with you."

Leopold bowed ceremoniously and slightly touched the young man's hand, whose face visibly saddened.

"You are not eager to know me, and I am not sur-



"If I can help you in any way, Mr. Meir, I shall be glad!"—Page 137.

prised at it. You are an educated man, with all the advantages of learning and I—I am only a common Jew, who knows the Bible and Talmud, but nothing else; but I have many thoughts; they are all dim and undefined; perhaps you will help me to clear them up."

Leopold listened to this humble youthful speech with an ironical smile.

"If I can help you in any way, Mr. Meir, I shall be glad."

"Leopold! do not call me mister. It hurts me, because I like you very much."

Leopold looked with astonished eyes at the young man.

"I am much obliged," he said; "but we scarcely know each other."

"That is nothing," said Meir. "I have longed to meet an Israelite like you, that I might say, as Rabbi Eliezer said to the sage of Jerusalem, Let me be your disciple, and be you my teacher."

The young worldling looked with open-eyed astonishment and a sarcastic smile at Meir, who seemed to him as unintelligible as an untrained savage.

Meir, carried away by his enthusiasm, did not notice this.

"Leopold," he began, "how long did you study at the foreign schools?"

"What do you mean by foreign schools?" asked Leopold.

"Why! the schools where they teach things not Jewish."

Leopold understood. He half shut his eyes and looked supercilious.

"If you mean the gymnasium, I studied there five years."

"Five years!" exclaimed Meir, "how learned you must be."

"Hm! there are people in the world more learned than I," and he smiled indulgently.

Meir drew a little nearer his companion, and his eyes sparkled.

"And what do they teach at the gymnasium?"

"Oh, all sorts of things," said Leopold, impatiently.

"What things?" persisted Meir.

Leopold, with an ironical smile, began to enumerate the different branches of science taught at schools.

Meir interrupted him excitedly,—

"And you know all these sciences?"

"Of course, I do," replied the guest.

"And what do you do with all that learning?"

This question put with eager curiosity, amazed the handsome lad.

"What do you mean by what I do with it?"

"I wanted to know what ideas all that learning awakens in your brain and the use you make of it in the world!"

"Oh! what I do in the world? I am in a government office and copy important documents."

Meir thought a little.

"No, that is not what I mean. You do that for your living; everybody has to work for his living. I meant what do you do besides? how do you work out your ideas in the world? what are your thoughts about the world?"

Leopold opened his eyes wider, and answered impatiently,—

"Of what should I think? When I return from the office I sit at home and smoke cigarettes, and think that when I marry, and my father gives me my share of his property I shall buy a house and arrange the first floor into beautiful shops, let the second to rich people and live myself on the third. I have my eye upon a beautiful house, I should like to buy. It brings in two thousand roubles a year without the outbuildings—"

It was Meir's turn to look astonished.

"And you do not think of anything besides that house!"

"No. What should I think about? I have no troubles on my mind; I live with my parents, and the salary I receive is sufficient to pay for my clothes and other little items."

Meir looked fixedly on the floor. There was a frown on his forehead which had not been there before.

"Listen, Leopold," he said, after thinking a little. "In that great town of yours are there no poor and benighted Jews?"

Leopold laughed.

"They are everywhere and in great numbers."

"And what do you think of them?" asked Meir, eagerly.

"Think of them? I think they are very stupid, and very dirty."

"And you look at them and think nothing else?" said Meir almost in a whisper.

Leopold opened his cigarette case and took out a cigarette.

Meir, deep in thought, took no notice.

"Leopold," he began, with rekindled energy, "do not buy that house in town."

"Why should I not buy it?"

"I will tell you why. They promised my cousin to you, who is a good and intelligent girl. She has no education, but wishes for it and was rejoiced to hear she should marry an educated man. When you marry her, ask the great officials to grant you permission to open a school here, at Szybow, where young men could be taught other things besides the Talmud and the Tora. You yourself would be at the head of the school, and I might help you in time if you will teach me."

Leopold laughed, but Meir, carried away by his own enthusiastic thoughts, did not perceive it and bent towards his companion, whispered impressively,—

"I tell you, Leopold, the people in this town are dreadfully benighted and desperately poor; but there are young people, like me, who sorrow because they do not know anything. They would like to learn, but there is nobody to teach them. There is the great Rabbi Todros, who holds them in check, and the elders of the Cahala who oppress the poor. If you came here and brought with you enlightened men, you would help us all to come out of misery and benightedness."

He said all this with glowing face and rapid voice. But nothing could compare to the expression of astonishment and sarcasm with which Leopold listened to the proposal.

He took a match out of a silver box and bent his head to conceal his laughter.

"Well," said Meir, "what do you think of it? is it not a good plan?"

Leopold struck his match at the side of the box and said,—

"I think that when I tell it to my family and the fellows at the office they will be greatly amused."

The fire went suddenly out of Meir's eyes.

"What is there to be amused at?"

Leopold had lit his cigarette, and the curling smoke wafted over the room and reached old Saul's nostrils. Rafael raised his head and looked around in astonishment. Saul looked in the direction of the window, and half raised himself from the sofa,—

"I beg your pardon," he said politely, but decidedly. "I do not allow people under my roof to trangress the law."

Saying this he quietly sat down again, but looked at Leopold from under his shaggy eyebrows. Leopold, grown very red, threw down his cigarette and angrily put his foot on it.

"There, you see the politeness of your people," he said.

"But why do you smoke on the Sabbath?"

"And you? do you not smoke on the Sabbath," asked the guest, with a sneer on his lips.

"No, I do not," replied Meir with decision.

"And yet you want to enlighten the masses, and believe the law forbids smoking on the Sabbath."

"I have left off believing in that long ago," said Meir.

"You want the people to stand up against the authority of the rabbi and Cahala, yet submit meekly to their tyrannous and minute prescriptions.”

Meir’s eyes shone again, but in anger and indignation. “If it were a matter of saving a human soul from darkness or a human body from misery, I should not yield, because these are important things; but if it be a question of pleasing myself, I yield; it would be stupid not to do so. I do not believe the law comes from God, but the elders also, and it seems to me whosoever goes against them in such insignificant things commits a breach of good manners.”

Leopold, after having listened to this speech turned his back upon him and went to where Mera was sitting. Meir looked after him with eyes full of sadness and disappointment, then left the window and went swiftly out of the room.

The disappearance of the young man seemed to depress the convivial gathering, at least the female element. The men did not heed it, to them it seemed natural and praiseworthy that the young man should be bashful in the presence of his fiancée, but the merchant’s wife, from Wilna, and Mistress Hana, became visibly sulky, and Mera pulled her mother’s gown and whispered,—

“Maman! let us go home.”

CHAPTER X.

In the meanwhile Meir went swiftly towards the dwelling of his friend Eliezer, but only to look through the window, seeing the little room empty he bent his steps in the direction of the meadow.

Like some weeks before, the little green oasis was bathed in the rosy light of the evening sun, but the grass which had lost its bright emerald color under the scorching heat, was not less beautiful because of the profusion of wild flowers, that filled the air with sweet perfume.

Close to the birchwood either sat or were stretched out at full length, several young men. Some conversed in low tones, others mechanically pulled up flowers and tall grasses, one or two looked at the golden clouds, singing softly. A little farther away, near the pond, half hidden by branches and tall grasses, sat a slender girl with a coral necklace round her dark throat, at her side the white goat nibbled at the grass.

Meir went swiftly towards the young men, who had evidently expected him, because all jumped up and fixed their eyes upon him. He did not look at any of them, and without greeting them by word or smile, as was his wont, sat down upon the fallen trunk. The young men looked at him in mute astonishment. Eliezer who had placed himself nearest, was the first to ask,—

"Well? have you seen him?"

"Have you seen him?" they repeated simultaneously. "What is he like? Is he very learned and wise?"

Meir raised his head and exclaimed angrily,—

"He may be learned, but he is not wise!"

This outburst struck his friends dumb with astonishment. After a short silence, Ariel, the magnificent Moreine Kalman's son, said pensively,—

"How is it possible, that a learned man should not be wise?"

"I do not know," said Meir, and his eyes opened wide as if he saw a terrible, unfathomable precipice before his eyes.

A conversation full of quick interrogation and short answers followed.

"What did he talk about!"

"He only talked about silly things!"

"Why did you not ask him about intelligent subjects!"

"I did; but he did not seem to understand even what I wanted from him."

"Did he tell you what his thoughts are about?"

"Yes, he told me. He thinks about buying a house, that should bring him two thousand roubles a year."

"He may think of buying houses; but what does he think besides."

"He said he does not think of anything else."

"And what does he do in the world?"

"Copies papers at the office; after business hours, smokes cigarettes at home and thinks about his house."

"And what does he think about the Jews who have no education and live in poverty?"

"He thinks they are a stupid and dirty lot."

"And what did he say when you told him about us, how we longed for somebody to teach us and save our minds from darkness?"

"He said that when his family and friends come to hear of it they will be much amused."

"What is there to be amused at?"

A long, thoughtful silence followed and then as in one voice, the young men cried out,—

"A bad man."

Presently Chaim, Meir's cousin, said,—

"Meir! that education and learning we wish for so much is perhaps not good, if it make people bad and stupid." Two or three young men called out,—

"Explain it to us, Meir!"

Meir looked round his friends with dull eyes and burying his face in his hands said:

"I do not know, I am all adrift."

This short reply sounded like a low, half-stifled sob. The singer Eliezer raised his hand and drew their attention away from the grieved young man.

"Do not be downcast, friends," he said, "I will ask the Master to answer your questions, and he drew from under the brushwood a large-sized book and with a triumphant smile, showed his friends the title-page. There, in great letters, stood the name of Moses Maimonides. The young people pressed closely around him, straightened themselves, and their faces expressed reverential attention.

The Israelitish sage was to solve their problems through the mouth of their beloved singer. The teacher was old, forgotten by many, anathematized by others, but dear and sacred to them, because their only one. From the time when his spirit had spoken to them out of the books Eliezer had brought with him, they had felt different beings, and longed for something better and wider than their usual everyday life. Unfortunately, they did not find answers to all their questions, or comfort in all their griefs. Centuries had passed, times changed and other teachers had proclaimed the truth, but they did not know them.

Eliezer did not begin at once but turned the leaves in search of a passage appropriate to their wants.

In the meanwhile the girl sitting near the pond, rose and gliding silently along the verge of the wood, followed by the goat, approached the group of young men and stood behind Meir. She had come so silently, that nobody noticed her presence; with one arm round a slender birch-stem, her head pressing against its branches she looked at Meir's bent head, the others she did not seem to notice at all.

Eliezer began in a clear and ringing voice,—

"Hear, oh Israel!"

With these words many psalms began and nearly all the religious readings of the Israelites. For the young men the words of the Teacher meant a psalm and a prayer of the soul.

Eliezer, in a slightly singing voice, began,—

"You ask me, my disciples, what force it is which attracts the heavenly bodies, called stars, for ever onwards, and why some rise so high as to be lost in the milky way whilst others remain far below their sisters.

"I will unveil before you the mystery you wish to penetrate. The force which attracts the heavenly bodies is the Perfection that dwells upon the highest height and whose name in the human language, is God. The stars, full of love and longing, strive forever to go higher, so as to be nearer the perfect Wisdom and Goodness. They sail forever within space, and those that have the most perfect love for the Ideal go nearest to it, those that are clogged with heavy matter and less desirous of participating with the God-light remain far behind.

"My disciples, from these heavenly bodies, which long most ardently for Perfection and come nearest it, proceed all the changes upon earth; all that grows and changes. From them spring all the shapes and symbols of things."

Eliezer stopped and raised his eyes, which were radiant with joy.

The young men were all pondering over the passage, trying in vain to find in the words of the sage the solution of their difficulties. Meir said with reflection,—

"There are people who lift up their spirit towards the Ideal. They believe in it and strive to raise themselves nearer to it. Others, like the heavenly bodies clogged with matter, do not long for Wisdom and Perfection, their spirits do not rise, but remain on the lower level."

They began to understand, and their faces beamed with pleasure. Such a small crumb of truth and knowledge rejoiced these souls, so poor and yet so rich.

Meir took the book, which evidently he knew well, from his friend's hands and read on another page,—

"The angels themselves are not all alike. They stand one above the other, as upon the steps of a ladder, and the highest of all is the spirit from whom comes thought and knowledge. This spirit is the life-giving intelligence, and the Hagada calls him the Prince of the World,—Sar-ha Olam."

"The highest angel is the spirit from whom comes thought and knowledge, and the Hagada calls him the Prince of the World," repeated the young men after Meir.

Their doubts had been dispersed. Knowledge again commanded their respect and roused their longing; before their eyes passed the vision of the highest of angels carrying in his purple folds wisdom and knowledge. They were thoughtful and dreamy. Dreamy and silent was the meadow and the forest beyond in the waning light. Suddenly the mellow voice of Eliezer interrupted the silence.

"Within a dream I saw the spirit of my people," began the singer before Jehovah.

Who composed this song, nobody knew. The first verse came probably from Eliezer, after one of his ecstatic dreams; Ariel, the son of Kalman, had composed another, whilst playing upon his violin; another from Meir, or maybe was lisped with childish lips by Chaim, the son of Abram. Where do all the people's songs come from? They are the outcome of yearning hearts, imprisoned thoughts straining towards a better life.

Thus originated the song which Eliezer intonated, and in which the young men joined with their clear voices,—

"Within my dream I saw the spirit of my people,
Did from his shoulders flow rich purple garments?
ptuous chariots carry him about the world?

In the dust of stony roads I saw his feet,
Dust covered were his limbs and weary head,
And tattered garments draped the wasted body
Which trembled."

Here a gentle whisper came from behind the branches,—

"Hush! people are coming!

In fact, on the path across the wood, the dark shadows of men were seen approaching, but the young people heard neither Golda's warning nor the steps which were drawing nearer. Loud and clear rang out the second verse,—

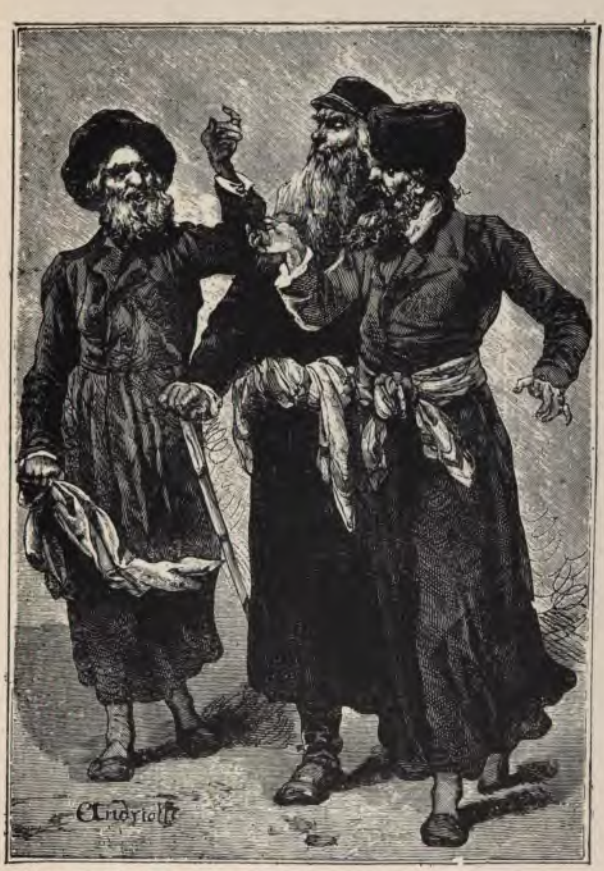
"Oh, spirit of my people, crushed by ages,
Of suffering; will not the Lord relent?
Where is it gone, the wisdom of your sages?
And where of Sion's roses is the scent?
Are all Lebanon's cedars crushed and broken?
Will never there resound your song in token
Of love and peace?"

The last words were still vibrating in the evening air, when three men entered the meadow. They wore their Sabbath garments, with colored handkerchief round their waist, which, on a Sabbath, can only be worn in this way without sin.

In the midst was Jankeil Kamionker, the father of Eliezer, the singer, and on either side Abram Ezofovitch, Chaim's father, and Moreine Kalman, the father of Ariel. In spite of the increasing dusk, they recognized their sons, and the sons their fathers. The voices of the young men trembled, grew fainter, and finally died away altogether. All were silent, except one voice, in which presently the clear, bell-like tones of a girl joined. It was Golda, who perhaps wanted to show that he was not deserted and share his danger. Not heeding their companion's silence or the presence of the threatening figures, their voices rose fresh and clear in the evening stillness,—

> "Let thy tired feet rest, and thy wounds be healed,
> Let the Kingdom arrive of wisdom and light,
> To disperse the shadows of darkness and night.
> Oh! rise, my people, shake the dust from thy feet,
> Break asunder thy chains and be ready to meet
> The angel of light."

The song had only three verses. After it there was silence. The elders of the community, standing in the middle of the meadow, turned back and, talking angrily and volubly to each other, directed their steps towards the house of Ezofovitch.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"Directed their steps toward the house of Esofovitch."—Page 150.

CHAPTER XI.

SAUL'S second son, Abram, was quite different from his brother, Rafael; the latter, in spite of his fifty odd years, was still handsome and erect; his manners grave and quiet.

The younger brother's figure was slightly bent, his speech quick and impulsive, betraying a passionate temper. Both brothers were learned, and through their knowledge had long ago acquired in the community the title of Moreine. Rafael had studied mostly the Talmud, and was known as one of the best Talmudists; Abram preferred the mystic intricacies of the Zohar. The elder brother was highly respected by outsiders, with whom he had business dealings; the younger was higher in the graces of the elders, and prided himself upon the friendship of the rabbi. A close bond of union existed between him and the two elders of the Cahala, Moreine Kalman and the pious Jankeil Kamionker. On week days they often transacted their business, as selling, buying, or taking leases, together; on the day of rest they read, meditated, or took walks together; which, on the Sabbath, were lawful, if not exceeding two thousand steps beyond their own houses. Sometimes when tempted by the freshness of the woods, each of them took a piece of bread, the symbol of their home and buried it; this enabled them to extend their walk two thousand steps further without

Abram looked at his father with flashing eyes.

"Father," he said, "think mostly of the Karaitish girl. This impure friendship brings great shame upon our house. You know, father, it is our custom that no true Israelite should look at any other woman but her whom his parents give him for his wife."

"He should not," shouted Reb Jankiel, passionately, and Kalman's face became very red. The modesty of these people was so ingrained in their lives that the very thought of profligacy made them blush.

Even old Saul changed color.

"I will marry him speedily," he said.

Abram replied.

"He will never marry as long as he sees the Karaitish girl."

"What can I do to prevent it?" said Saul, almost despairingly.

The three men looked at each other.

"Something must be done with her," they said, unanimously.

After a prolonged silence and looking at each other, the two men bowed before Saul and left the room.

Abram remained behind.

"Father, how will you punish him?"

"He shall be shut up in the Bet-ha Midrash for a whole week and read the Talmud."

"That will do no good, you had better have him flogged."

Saul still kept his face down.

"I will not have him flogged," he said decidedly, and after a while, added in a low voice, "The soul of Michael lived in father's body, and the spirit of Hersz dwells now in Meir's body."

"How can we know that?" said Abram, evidently struck by his father's words.

"The spirit was first recognized by his great-grandmother, and afterwards by Rabbi Isaac."

Saul sighed wearily.

"He will sit in Bet-ha Midrash and read the Talmud, neither sleep nor eat under my roof for a whole week, and the Shamess (messenger of the Synagogue) shall make public his shame and his punishment."

END OF PART THE FIRST.

PART II.

CHAPTER I.

THE Bet-ha-Midrash was a large, well-lighted building, close to the synagogue. It served for various purposes. People congregated there for the less solemn prayers or lectures ; the learned used it for their discussions upon knotty points of the Law ; here also were kept the books of the different brotherhoods or societies, of which there are many in every Jewish community. Lastly, it served as a place of penance in exceptional cases, when any of the young men had transgressed the religious or moral laws. The punishment was not so much a physical discomfort as a moral one, and left an indelible stain upon the delinquent's character.

Opposite the Ha Midrash rose a smaller but equally well-kept building. It was the Bet-ha-Cahol or Cahala rooms, where the functionaries of the town council and the elders held their sittings. A little further was a less pretentious building, the Hek-Dosh or poor-house, where all those who were unable to work and hungry, had the right to apply for food and shelter.

Opposite the house of prayer was the cheder or school, where the learned and much-respected Reb Mosze ruled. The court with all its buildings, from the synagogue and hospital to the tiny dwelling of the rabbi was like the capitol of a small realm; everything was there which could promote the well-being of the public.

All these buildings had been raised at one time, to embody a great idea, either to serve God or mankind. In what manner these lofty ideas had been perverted and served other purposes than those first conceived is another thing altogether—for this we must ask history.

Eight days had elapsed, since that memorable evening when the young men had conversed and sung together on the meadow. On the ninth day, about sunset, Meir left the Ha Midrash and stood in its high portico.

Obedient to the order of the head of the family, he had spent the week in utter solitude, reading the Talmud which he knew so well already and for which, in spite of all the doubts which troubled his mind, he never lost the reverence implanted into him from his childhood. The penance had not brought him any physical discomforts, his meals were carried to him from home, where the charitable women had tried to make them even more palatable than usual. Nevertheless, he was much changed. He looked paler, thinner, yet withal more manly. Neither in his expression or bearing was there any trace of his former almost childish timidity. Perhaps his intelligence had rebelled against the injustice of the punishment; maybe the solitude and the study of the many volumes in the Ha Midrash, had called forth new ideas and confirmed him in the old ones. The nervous contraction of his brow and feverish burning eyes betrayed hard mental work, all the harder because without help or guide. The penance inflicted upon him had missed its aim. Instead of quieting and soothing the restless spirit, it had made him bolder and more rebellious.

When Meir descended the steps into the court another feeling took hold of him, that of shame. At the sight of several people crossing the courtyard he dropped his eyes and blushed. They were the Elders of the Cahala, who seeing Meir, pointed at him and laughed. One of them, Jankiel Kamionker did not laugh, and seemingly had not even noticed the young man. He was walking apart from his companions and his face looked troubled and preoccupied. Instead of entering into the Cahala building with the other men, he almost stealthily approached the almshouse ; he only passed it, but it was sufficient to exchange a few whispered words with a man whose shaggy hair and swollen countenance appeared in the open window. Meir knew the man and silently wondered what business the rich and pious Jankiel could have with a thief and vagrant like the carrier Jochel. But he did not think much about it and directed his steps, not towards home but to a small passage near the school, which would bring him out into the fields ; he was longing for space and air. He stood still for a few minutes. An odd murmuring noise rising and falling, mixed with occasional wailing reached his ear, it was dominated by a thick hoarse voice alternately reading, talking, or scolding.

A peculiar smile crossed Meir's face ; it expressed anger and compassion. He was standing near the school, where the melamed Reb Mosze infused knowledge into the juvenile minds. Something seemed to attract him there, he leaned his elbows on the window sill and looked in. It was a narrow, low, and evil-smelling room. Between the blackened ceiling, wall, and floor full of dirt and litter, which filled the air with a damp and heavy vapor, there seethed and rocked a compact gray mass which produced the murmuring noise. By and by, as if out of a dense fog, childish faces seemed to detach themselves. The faces were various, some dark and coarse, as if swollen with disease ; others, pale, delicate, and finely cut. As various as the faces were their expressions, there were those who with mouth wide open and idiotic eyes stared into vacancy, others twitched and fretted with ill-concealed impatience but most of them, though suffering, looked patient and submissive. Their outward appearance showed an equal variety from the decent coat of the rich man's child, in gentle graduations to the sleeveless jackets and tatters of the very poorest classes. Some fifty children were crowded in that room which barely accommodated half that number. They sat almost one upon the other on hard, dirty benches closely packed together. This was not the only school in Szybow, but none of the others was so eagerly sought after by the parents as the one conducted by Reb Mosze, known by his piety and cabalistic knowledge, the favorite of the rabbi. It must not be thought that Reb Mosze initiated his scholars into the first steps of learning ; this would have been a sheer waste of his capabilities, which were aiming at something higher. The children he received were from ten to twelve years old, and had already been taught in other schools to read Hebrew and the Chumesh or Five f Moses, with all their explanations and commentaries; after that they came under the tuition of Reb Mosze and were introduced to the Talmud, with all its chapters, paragraphs, debatable points, and commentaries above commentaries.

All this would have been more than sufficient to enlarge or confuse the minds of those pale, miserable children, but Reb Mosze in his zeal did not content himself with exercising the memory of his scholars, he wanted also to develop their imagination, and sometimes treated them to extracts from the metaphysical Cabala. The reading or expounding of parts of those books were looked upon by him as a kind of rest or recreation, which sometimes it proved to be when the melamed was too deeply absorbed to watch his audience.

The melamed was thus occupied when Meir looked through the window. He was bending over a heavy book with an expression of ecstatic rapture and rocking his body to and fro with the chair upon which he sat. The scholars with their books before them were also rocking themselves and repeating their lessons in a loud murmur, sometimes smiting the edge of the bench with their fists by way of emphasis or burying their hands into their already towzled manes.

Suddenly the melamed left off rocking himself, took the heavy book in both hands and struck it with all his might upon the table. It was the signal for silence. The scholars left off rocking and raised their eyes in sudden alarm, thinking the time had come to give out their lesson.

But the melamed did not think of the lessons, his spirit had been carried away into other spheres altogether, but he was still dimly conscious of his duties as a teacher, and wanted his scholars to share in his spiritual rapture. He raised his finger and began to read a paragraph from the Scheier-Koma.

"The great prince of knowledge thus describes the greatness of Jehovah. The height of Jehovah is one hundred six and thirty times a thousand leagues. From the right hand of Jehovah to his left the distance is seventy-seven times ten thousand leagues. His skull is three times ten thousand leagues in length and breadth. The crown on his head is sixty times ten thousand leagues long. The soles of the feet of the King of kings are thirty thousand leagues long. From the heel to the knee nineteen times ten thousand leagues; from the knees to the hip, twelve times ten thousand and four leagues. From the loins to the neck, twenty-four times ten thousand leagues. Such is the greatness of the King of kings, the Lord of the world."

After this last exclamation, Reb Mosze, his hands raised in the air, remained motionless. Motionless likewise were the children. All, without exception, the timid and the mischievous, the idiotic and the sensible ones, stared open-mouthed at the melamed. The description of Jehovah's greatness seemed to have paralyzed their minds.

After a short pause the melamed woke up to the every-day business and called out,—

"Go on."

The children again resumed their murmur and rocking. It would have been impossible from their confused voices to get an inkling of what they were learning, but Meir who had passed through the same course and possessed an excellent memory understood that they were at the eighth chapter of Berachot (about the blessing).

The children in a singing murmur, with great efforts that brought the perspiration in their faces, read,—

"Mischna, the first: The disputed questions between the schools of Shamaï and Hillel. The school of Shamaï says: 'First, bless the day and then the wine.' The school of Hillel says: 'First bless the wine and then the day' (the Sabbath).

"Mischna 2. The school of Shamaï says: 'To wash the hands, then fill the cup.' Hillel says: 'Fill the cup, then wash the hands.'

"Mischna 3. The school of Shamaï says: 'After washing hands put the napkin on the table. The school of Hillel says: 'Put it on a cushion.'

"Mischna 4. The school of Shamaï says: 'Sweep the room, then wash your hands.' The school of Hillel: 'Wash your hands, then sweep the room.'"

A double knock with the heavy book upon the rickety table reduced the scholars to silence once more.

The melamed's round and gleaming eyes wandered about the room as if in search for a victim. He pointed to one of the hindmost benches and called out,—

"Leibele!"

A pale and slender child rose at the summons and fixed a pair of large frightened eyes upon the teacher.

"Come here."

There was a great rustle amongst the boys, for it was no easy matter to pass across that dense mass of children.

Leibele at last managed to squeeze himself through, and holding his heavy book with both hands stood within the small space between the teacher's table and the first bench. He did not look at the melamed, but kept his eyes fixed upon the book.

"Why do you look down like a brigand?—look at me!" and the melamed struck him under his chin.

The child looked at him, his eyes slowly filling with tears.

"Well! what does the school of Shamaï say? and what the school of Hillel?" began the melamed.

There was a long silence. The children on the first bench nudged his elbow and whispered,—

"Speak out!"

"The school of Shamaï," began Leibele, in a trembling voice, "says, bless the wine. . ."

"The day, the day and then the wine," whispered a few compassionate voices from the first bench. But at the same time the melamed's hand came into contact with the ear of one of the offenders and his yell reduced the others to silence.

Reb Mosze turned again to the child,—

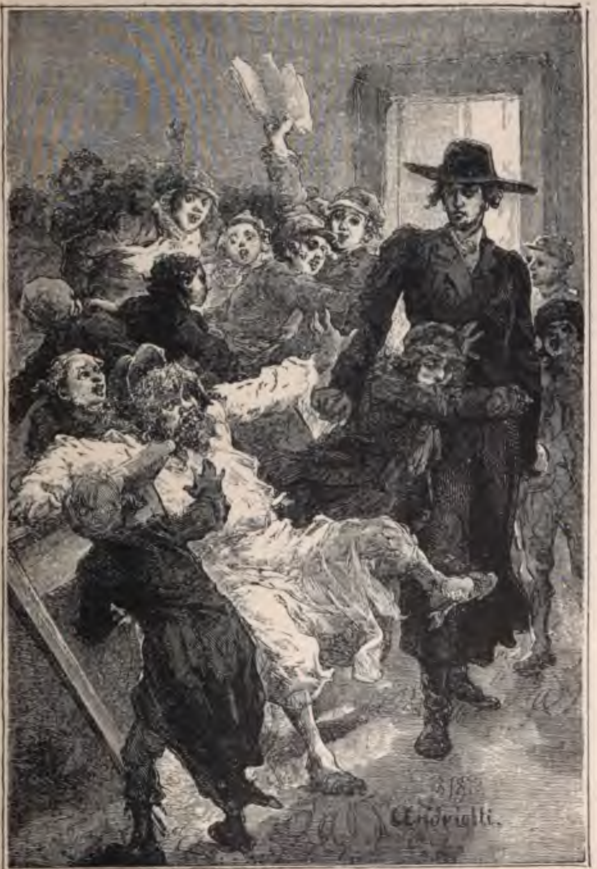
"Mischna, the first. What says the school of Shamaï?"

The answer came in a still more trembling, almost inaudible voice,—

"The school of Shamaï says: bless the wine. . ."

The melamed's fist came down upon the young Talmudist's shoulder out of whose hands the heavy book slipped and fell upon the floor.

"You bad, abominable boy," yelled the melamed, "you



"Losing his footing, he fell down, carrying with him the rickety table."—Page 165.

do not learn your lessons and throw your book on the floor, did you not read that the school of Shamaï says 'to bless first the day and then the wine?'"

Here a loud and sarcastic voice from the window called out,—

"Reb Mosze, that poor child has never seen any wine in his life, and suffers hunger and flogging every day; it is not easy for him to remember whether to bless first the day and then the wine."

But Reb Mosze did not hear that speech, because both his hands were busy in belaboring the head and shoulders of his pupil who, without crying out, tried to avoid the blows by ducking on the floor. Suddenly a pair of strong hands pushed the melamed aside, who losing his footing, fell down, carrying with him the rickety table.

"Reb Mosze!" called out the same sarcastic and angry voice,—

"Is this not an Israelitish child that you wreak your spite upon it? Is it not a poor man's child and our brother?"

His face burning with indignation he bent down and raising the child in his arms turned towards the door.

"Reb Mosze, you take all the intelligence out of the children's heads, kill all the feeling in their hearts; I heard them laughing when you beat Leibele."

Saying this, he disappeared with the child in his arms.

Only then Reb Mosze woke up from the stupefaction into which the sudden assault had plunged, him and disengaging his burly frame from under the table, he shouted,—

"Assassin! murderer!" and turning towards his scholars, yelled,—

"Get hold of him! stone him!"

But he addressed empty benches; the books lay scattered about and the seats turned upside down. The scholars seeing their master prostrate under the table and one of their companions rescued by main force, partly from fright, partly from a wish for liberty, had all rushed through the door and dispersed about the town like a flight of birds released from the cage.

The school was empty and the court was deserted, except for a few grave men who stood in the portico of the Bet-ha-Cahol and towards them rushed the frantic melamed, panting and tearing his hair. Meir in the mean while went swiftly on, with the child in his arms, whose tears fell thick and fast, but the eyes which through the tears looked at Meir were not the eyes of an idiot any longer.

"Moreine!" whispered Leibele.

"Moreine!" he repeated in a still lower voice, "how good you are!"

At the corner of the little street where the tailor lived, Meir put the child down.

"There," he said, pointing at Izmul's house, "go home now."

The child stiffened, put his hands into his sleeves and remained motionless. Meir smiled and looked into his face.

"Are you afraid?"

"I am afraid," said the motionless boy.

Instead of returning as he had intended, the young man went towards Izmul's hut, followed at a distance by Leibele. The day was almost over and so was the work in the little street. The pale and ragged inhabitants crowded before their thresholds.

Scarcely had Meir penetrated into the street, when he became aware of a great change in the attitude of the people towards him. Formerly the grandson of Saul had been greeted effusively from all sides. They had come to him with their complaints, sometimes asked for advice, others had greeted him from the window with loud voices.

Now scarcely anybody seemed to notice him. The men looked away, the women glanced at him with curiosity, whispered to each other, and pointed their fingers at him. One of the woodcutters with whom he had worked at his grandfather's looked at him sadly and withdrew into his hut. Meir shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"What is it all about?" he thought. "What wrong have I done to them?" Strange it seemed to him also that the tailor did not rush out to meet him with his usual effusive flatteries and complainings; nevertheless, he entered the dwelling. Leibele remained outside, crouching near the wall.

The young man had to bend his head in order to cross the low door leading into the dark entrance where two goats were dimly visible, thence to the room where the air, in spite of the open window, felt heavy and oppressive. A thin woman with a wrinkled face passed him on the threshold. It was Izmul's wife who carried a piece of brown bread to the child outside, Leibele's supper when he came home from school.

CHAPTER II.

THE whole family were eating a similar supper with the exception of the elder and grown-up people, who seasoned their bread with pinches of chopped raw onion, of which a small quantity was lying on a battered plate. Besides Leibele, there were two younger boys sitting on the floor, a two-year old child crawled about on all fours, and a few months old baby was suspended in a cradle near the ceiling and rocked by one of the elder girls. Another was busy with the goats, and a third feeding a blind old woman, Izmul's mother. She broke the bread in little pieces, sprinkled onion upon it and put it into the grandmother's hand, sometimes in her mouth. The blind mother was the only one in the family who possessed a bed, the others slept on the floor or upon the hard benches. She looked well cared for, the crossover on her shoulders was clean and whole, and on her head she had a quilted cap of black satin, profusely trimmed.

The granddaughter seemed quite absorbed in her task of administering to the old woman. She patted the wrinkled hand encouragingly when she perceived her difficulty in masticating the hard food. As in the prosperous household of Saul, so in the dirty hut of the tailor Izmul, the mother occupied the first place, and was the object of general care and reverence. It is never seen in Israel that a son, be he rich or poor, neglects those who gave him life. "Like the branches of a tree, we all sprung from her," said the head of the house of Ezofovitch.

The tailor Izmul could not express his feelings like Saul, but when his mother lost her sight, he tore his long, curly hair in despair; fasted with his whole family for three days, and with the money thus saved bought an old bedstead, which he put together with his own hands, against the wall; and when Sara Ezofovitch, Ber's wife, gave him an order to sew a black satin dress for her, he cut a goodish piece from the rich material to make a quilted cap for his mother.

When Izmul saw Meir coming into the room, he jumped up and bent his flexible body in two, but did not kiss his hand as usually, or call out joyfully,—

"Ai! what a visitor, what a welcome visitor!"

"Moreine," he exclaimed, "I have heard of what you have done. The children from school were running past and said you had knocked the melamed under the table, and rescued my Leibele from his powerful hands. You did it out of kindness, but it was a rash deed, moreine, and a sinful one, and will bring me into great trouble. Reb Mosze will not take Leibele back or receive any of my other boys, and they will remain stupid and ignorant."

"Ai! ai! moreine, you brought trouble upon me and upon yourself with your kindly heart."

"Do not trouble about me, Izmul, never mind about what I brought upon myself, but take pity upon your child, and at least do not whip him at home; he suffers enough at school."

cannot find any work, and is obliged to seek shelter in the Hek-Dosh (poor-house)."

Jochel sighed heavily, but soon raised his head almost defiantly.

"That cannot be helped," he said, "perhaps I shall soon see my way to make a big profit."

The words of the vagrant recalled to Meir's mind, the short interview he had witnessed at the window of the poor-house, between Jochel and Jankiel Kamionker. At the same time he was struck by the expression of the tailor's face which twitched all over as if under the influence of a great excitement. His eyes sparkled and the hands trembled.

"Who knows," he exclaimed, "what may happen in the future. Those that are poor one day, may become rich the other. Who knows? The poor tailor Izmul may yet build a house on the market square, and set up in business for himself."

Meir smiled sadly. The groundless hopes of these poor outcasts stirred his compassion. He looked absently around and through the window at the fields beyond.

"You, Izmul," he said, "will certainly not build big houses; nor you, Jochel, make heavy profits. Is it to be thought of? You are too many, and there is not enough for you all. I sometimes think if you left these narrow dirty streets and looked about in the world, you might find a better way of living; even if you worked like the peasants on the soil, your life would be easier."

He said this in an absent way, not so much addressing the two men before him, as the noisy crowd without.

But when Izmul heard these words, he twice jumped into the air and twisted his cap upon his head.

"Moreine!" he cried out, "what ugly words come from your lips. Moreine! do you wish to turn Israel upside down?"

"Izmul," said Meir angrily, "it is true. When I look at your misery, and the misery of your families, I should like to turn things upside down."

"Ai! ai!" cried the impressible and lively Izmul, holding his head with both hands. "I would not believe what the people said of you and called them liars; but I see myself now, that you are a bad Israelite, and the covenant and customs of your forefathers are not dear to you any longer."

Meir started, and drew himself up.

"Who dares to say, I am a bad Israelite?" he exclaimed. Izmul's excited face, took a quieter but more solemn expression, and he came closer to Meir. Nobody would hear him, as the inmates of the room had gone into the street and Jochel retired into his corner to finish his meal. All the same he spoke in an impressive whisper, as if about to disclose a terrible secret.

"Moreine! it is no use asking who said it. People whisper, like leaves upon a tree; who is to say which special leaf has whispered or which mouth? Everybody speaks ill of you. They say you break the Sabbath, read accursed books, sing abominable songs, and incite young men to rebellion; that you do not pay due respect to the learned and wealthy members of the community, and—" here he seemed to hesitate and added in a still lower voice, and that you live in friendship with the Karaitish girl."

Meir listened like one turned to stone. He had grown very pale and his eyes were flashing.

"Who dares to say that? he repeated, in a choking voice.

"Moreine!" replied Izmul, waving both hands, "you were sent for a week into the Bet-ha-Midrash to do penance. When the poor people in this street heard of it, there was a great commotion. Some wanted to go to your grandfather Saul, and to the rabbi, to ask them not to put you to shame. The wood-cutter Judel wanted to go, the carrier Baruch, well, and the chaiet Izmul too. But soon afterwards people began to talk and we heard why you had been punished; then we remained quiet and said to each other: He is good and charitable, never proud with poor people, he helped us often in our misery, but if he do not keep the covenant, his grandfather Saul is right to punish him."

He stopped at last out of breath with his rapid speech, and Meir fixed his penetrating eyes upon him and asked,—

"Izmul! if the learned and wealthy people ordered me to be stoned, would you also think they were right?"

Izmul retreated a few steps in horror.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed, "why should you think of such terrible things?" and then added in a thoughtful voice, Well, Moreine! if you did not keep the holy Covenant—"

Meir interrupted in a louder tone,—

"And do you know yourself, Izmul, what is the covenant? How much of it is God's law? and how much people's invention?"

"Hush!" hissed Izmul, in a low voice, "people can hear, and I should not like anything unpleasant to happen to you under my roof."

Meir looked at the window and saw several people sitting on the bench before Izmul's house. They did not seem to listen but talked amongst themselves; at the last words of Meir and Izmul's they had raised their heads and looked into the window with a half-astonished half-indignant expression. Meir shrugged his shoulders impatiently and without saying good-bye turned towards the door. He had almost crossed the threshold when Izmul rushed after him, stooped down, and kissed his hand.

"Moreine?" he whispered, "I am sorry for you. Think better of it, reflect in time and do not cause scandal in Israel. Your heart is made of gold, but your head is full of fire. Remember what you did to the melamed to-day!—If you were not under such a terrible cloud, Moreine," he went on, raising a nervously twitching face up to Meir. "I should have opened my heart before you, because to-day, the chaiet Izmul is in sore trouble. I do not know what to do! He may remain poor all his life or he may become rich! He may be happy or very wretched. A great fortune is coming to him, and he is afraid to take it because it looks like misfortune!"

Meir looked in silent amazement at the poor man who evidently tried to convey some secret to him; but, at the same time from beyond the blackened stove came Jochel's deep voice,—

"Izmul! will you be quiet! Come here, I want you."

The tailor with his troubled face rushed towards him, and Meir, deeply musing, went out into the street.

It was evident from the clouded mien of the men and their scanty greetings that he was not so welcome to them as he used to be. Nobody rose when he passed or approached him with a friendly word. Only the child rose when he had passed, pushed his hands into the sleeves of his garments and followed him.

Walking one behind the other, they crossed a long narrow street and found themselves in the fields which divided Abel Karaïm's hut from the town.

CHAPTER III.

It was almost dark now, but no flickering light was to be seen in Abel's window. They were not asleep yet, as Meir could see the dark outline of Golda near the window.

They greeted each other with a silent motion of the head.

"Golda!" said Meir, in a low and rapid voice, "have you met with any unpleasantness lately? Has anybody molested you?"

The girl pondered a little over his question.

"Why do you ask me that, Meir?"

"I was afraid some injury might have been done to you. People have spread some foolish slander about us."

"I do not mind injury, I have grown up with it, injury is my sister."

Meir still looked troubled.

"Why have you no light burning?" he said.

"I have nothing to spin, and zeide prays in the dark."

"And why have you nothing to spin?"

"I carried the yarn to Hana Witebska and Sara, Ber's wife, and they did not give me any more wool."

"They have not insulted you?" asked Meir, angrily.

Golda was again silent.

"People's eyes say often worse things than their tongue," she replied at last, quietly.

She evidently did not want to complain, or maybe her mind was too full of other things to heed it much.

"Meir," she said, "you have been in great trouble lately."

Meir sat down upon the bench outside and leaned his head upon his hand with a weary sigh.

"The greatest trouble and grief fell upon me to-day, when I found that the people have turned away from me. Their former friendship has changed into ill-feeling and those that confided in me suspect me now of evil."

Golda hung her head sadly, and Meir, went on: "I do not know myself what to do; if I follow the promptings of my heart, my people will hate and persecute me—if I act against my conscience, I shall hate myself and never know peace or happiness.—Whilst I was sitting in the Bet-ha Midrash I had almost made up my mind to let things be, and to try and live in peace with everybody—but when I had left the Ha Midrash my temper again got the better of me, and rescuing a poor child, I offended the melamed and through him the elders and the people. That is what I have done to-day. And when I come to think of it, it seems to me a rash useless act, as it will not prevent the melamed from destroying the poor children's health and intelligence. What can I do? I am alone, young, without a wife and family or any position in the world. They can do with me what they like, and I can do nothing. They will persecute my friends until they desert *me; they* have already begun to injure and insult you, *because you* gave me your heart and joined your voice with mine on the meadow. I shall only bring unhappiness to you ; perhaps it would be better to shut my eyes and ears to everything and live like other people." His voice became lower and lower and more difficult from the inward struggle with doubts and perplexities.

Both remained silent for a few minutes, when suddenly a strange noise, seemingly from the other side of the hill, reached their ears. First it sounded faint and distant like the passing of many wheels upon a soft sandy, soil. It grew louder by degrees, till the grating of wheels and stamping of many human feet could be heard quite distinctly. All this amidst the dark silence of the night gave it a mysterious almost unreal appearance.

Meir stood straight up and listened intently.

"What is that ?" asked Meir.

"What can it be ?" said Golda, in her quiet voice.

It seemed as if a great many carts were passing at the other side of the hill.

"I thought something rumbled and knocked, inside the hill," said Golda.

Indeed it sounded now like human steps, inside the hill, and as if they were throwing down some heavy weights. There was fear in Meir's face. He looked intently at Golda : "Shut the window, and bolt your door, " he said quickly, "I will go and see what it is !"

It was evident that he was frightened only on her account.

"Why should I fasten either window or door. A strong hand could easily wrench them open."

Meir went round the base of the hill, and soon found himself on the other side. What he saw there filled him with the greatest astonishment.

In a half circle, upon the sandy furrows, stood a great many carts laden with casks of all sizes. Around the carts a great many people were moving, peasants and Jews. The peasants were busy unloading the carts and rolling the casks into a cavern, which either nature or human hands had shaped in the hill.

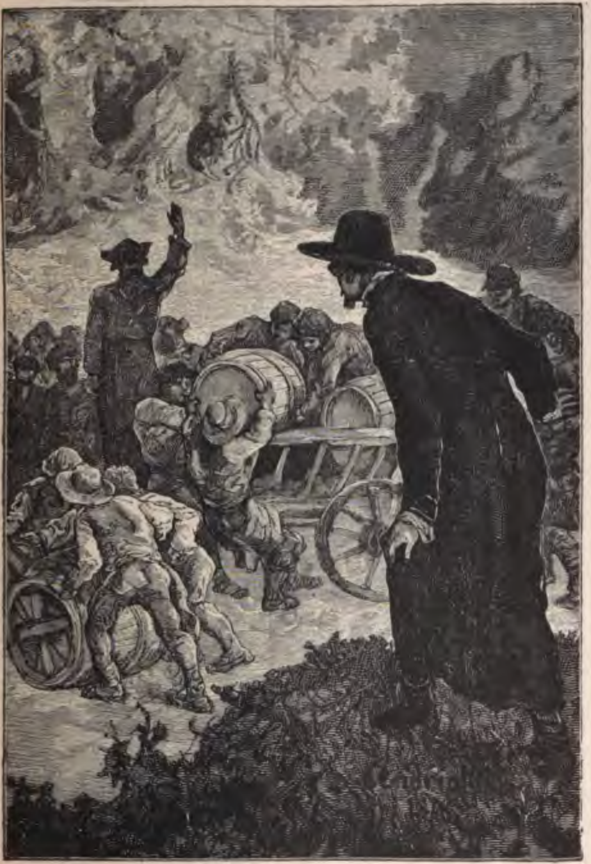
The Jews who were flitting in and out, amongst the carts looking at the casks, or sounding them with their knuckles, finally crowded round a man who stood leaning his back against the side of the hill, and a low-voiced, but lively discussion followed. Amongst the Jews, Meir recognized several innkeepers from the neighborhood, and in the man with whom they conversed, Jankiel Kamionker. The peasants whose task it was to unload the carts preserved a gloomy silence. A strong smell of alcohol permeated the air.

The astonishment of Meir did not last long. He began to see the meaning of the whole scene, and seemingly had made up his mind what to do, as he moved a few steps in Jankiel Kamionker's direction. He had not gone far when a huge shadow detached itself from a projection of the hill and barred the way.

"Where are you going, Meir?" whispered a man.

"Why do you stop me from going, Jochel," replied Meir, and tried to push him aside. But Jochel grasped him by the coat tails.

"Do you not care for your life any more?" he whispered. "I am sorry for you, because you are good and charitable, take warning and go at once."



"A strong smell of alcohol permeated the air."—Page 180.

"But I want to know what Reb Jankiel and his innkeepers are going to do with the casks," persisted Meir.

"It does not concern you," whispered Jochel, "let neither your eyes see, nor your ears hear what Reb Jankiel is doing. He is engaged in a big business, you will only hinder him. Why should you stand in his way? What do you gain by it? beside, what can you do against him?"

Meir remained silent, and turned into another direction.

"What can I do?" he whispered to himself, with quivering lips.

Passing near Abel Karaim's hut he saw Golda still standing at the window. He nodded to her.

"Sleep in peace."

But she called out to him,—

"Meir, here is a child sitting on the floor asleep."

He came nearer, and saw, close to the bench where he had been sitting, the crouching figure of a child.

"Leibele!" he said, wonderingly. He had not seen the lad, who had quietly followed him, and sat down close to him."

"Leibele!" repeated Meir, and put his hand upon the child's head. He opened a pair of half-unconscious eyes and smiled.

"Why did you come here," asked Meir, smilingly.

The child seemed to collect his thoughts, then answered,—

"I followed you."

"Father and mother will not know what has become of you."

"Father sleeps, and mother sleeps," began Leibele rocking his head,—and the goats are sleeping," he added after a while, and at the remembrance of those, his best friends, he laughed aloud.

But from Meir's lips the slight smile had vanished. He sighed and said, as if to himself,—

"How shall I act? What ought I to do?"

Golda, with her hands crossed above her head, looked thoughtfully up to the starry sky. After a while she whispered timidly,—

"I will ask zeide; zeide is very learned, he knows the whole Bible by heart."

"Ask him," said Meir.

The girl turned her head towards the dark interior, and called out,—

"Zeide! What does Jehovah command a man to do, from whom the people have turned away because he does not want to act against his conscience."

Abel interrupted his prayers. He was accustomed to his granddaughter's inquiries and to answer them; he seemed to ponder a few minutes and then in his quavering but distinct voice, replied,—

"Jehovah says: 'I made you a prophet, a guardian over Israel! Hear my words and repeat them to the people. If you do this, I shall call you a faithful servant, if you remain silent, on your head be the woes of Israel.

The old voice became silent, but Meir listened still with glowing eyes. Then he pointed into the dark room and said,—

"He has said the truth! through his mouth has spoken the old covenant of Moses, the one true covenant."

Tears gleamed in Golda's eyes, but Meir saw them not, so deeply was he engaged in thoughts which fired his whole being. He gently bent his head before the girl and went away. She remained in the open window. Her bearing was quiet, but silent tears one after the other rolled down her thin face,—

"They beheaded the prophet Hosea, and drove the prophet Jeremiah out of Jerusalem," she whispered.

Meir, at a distance from the hut, raised his face to heaven. "Rabbi Akiba died in great tortures for his convictions," he murmured.

Golda's eyes followed him still, though she could not see him any longer, and folding her hands, she murmured :—

"Like Ruth said to Naömi, I will say to the light of my soul, 'Whither thou goest, I will go; where thou diest, I will die!'"

In this way these two children, thoroughly imbued with the old history and legends of Israel, which represented to them all worldly knowledge, drew from them comfort and courage.

CHAPTER IV.

THE day had scarcely begun to dawn when, in Kamionker's house, everybody, except the smallest children, was awake and stirring. It was a red-letter day for the landlord of the inn, as it was the principal fair, which brought crowds of people of all sorts to the town. Both Jankiel's daughters, two strong and slatternly girls, with the help of the boy Mendel, whose stupid, malicious face bore the traces of Reb Mosze's training, were busy preparing the two guest rooms for the arrival of distinguished customers. Next to the guests' rooms was the large barroom, where, during the fair, crowds of country people were wont to drink and to dance. The servant tried to clean the benches around the wall and made a scanty fire in the great black stove, as the morning was cool and the air damp and musty. In Jankiel's room, the first from the entrance, and the window of which looked upon the yet empty market-square, stood two people, Jankiel and his wife Jenka, both at their morning prayers.

Jankiel, dressed in his everyday gaberdine and black kerchief twisted round his neck, rocked his body violently and prayed in a loud voice :

"Blessed be the Lord of the world that he has not made me a heathen !

"Blessed be the Lord that he has not made me a slave !

"Blessed be the Lord that he has not made me a woman!"

At the same time Jenka, dressed in a blue sleeveless caftan and short petticoat, bent her body in short, jerky motions, and in a voice much lower than her husband's, began:

"Blessed be the Lord of the world that has made me according to his will!"

Rocking to and fro, she sighed heavily:

"Blessed be the Lord who gives strength to the tired and drives away from the eyes sleep and weariness!"

Then Jankiel took up the white tallith with the black border, and, wrapping in its soft folds, exclaimed:

"Blessed be the Lord who enlightened us with his Law and bade us to cover ourselves with the tallith!"

He put the philacteries, or holy scroll, upon his forehead and wrists, saying,—

"I betroth myself forever, betroth myself unto the truth, unto the everlasting grace . . ."

Both husband and wife were so absorbed in their prayers that they did not hear the quick step of a man.

Meir Ezofovitch crossed the room where Jankiel and his wife were praying, and the next, which was full of beds and trunks, where the two smaller children were still asleep, and opened the door of his friend's room.

There was as yet only a dim light in the little room, where Eliezer stood at the window and prayed. He recognized his friend's step, but did not interrupt his prayers, only raised his hands as if inviting him to join,—

"Oh, Lord of hosts, how long wilt thou be angry against the prayer of thy people?"

Meir stood a few steps apart and responded, as the people respond to the singer:

"Thou feedest them with the bread of stones, and givest them tears to drink in great measure."

"Thou makest us a strife unto our neighbors and our enemies laugh among themselves," intonated Eliezer.

In this way the two friends sang one of the most beautiful complaints that ever rose from earth to heaven. Every word is a tear, every verse a melody expressing the tragic history of a great people.

There was as different an expression in the faces of the two young men as their characters were unlike each other. Eliezer's blue eyes were full of tears, his delicate features full of dreaminess and rapture.

Meir stood erect, his burning eyes fixed in the sky, and his brow was contracted, as if in pain or anger. They both prayed from the depths of their hearts until the end, and then their formerly united souls parted. Eliezer intonated the prayer for the Wise Men of Israel:

"O Lord of heaven! guard and watch over the Wise Men of Israel, their wives, children, and disciples, always and everywhere! Say unto me amen!"

Meir did not say amen. He was silent. The singer seemed to wait for his response, when Meir, slightly raising his voice, said, with quivering lips:

"Guard, O Lord, and watch over our brethren in Israel that live in sin and darkness, always and everywhere, bring them from darkness into light, from bondage into freedom! Say unto me amen!"

"Amen!" exclaimed Eliezer, turning towards his friend, and their hands met in a hearty grasp.

"Eliezer," said Meir, "you look changed since I saw you last."

"And you, Meir, look different."

Only a week had passed over their heads; sometimes one week means as much as ten years.

"I have suffered much during that week," whispered the singer.

Meir did not complain.

"Eliezer!" he said, "give me 'More Nebuchim.' I came to you so early to ask for that book. I want it very much!"

Eliezer stood with his head hanging down dejectedly.

"I have not got the book any longer," he said in a low voice.

"Where is it?" asked Meir.

"The book which brought us light and comfort is no more. The fire has devoured it and the ashes are scattered to the winds."

"Eliezer!" burst out Meir, "have you got frightened and burned it?"

"My hands could never have committed the deed; even had my mouth commanded it, they would not have obeyed. A week ago my father came to me in a great fury and ordered me to give up the accursed book, we had been reading together on the meadow. He shouted at me, 'Have you got that book?' I said, 'I have.' He then asked, 'Where is it?' I remained silent. He looked as if he would have liked to beat me, but did not dare on account of my position in the synagogue and the love people bear me. He then ransacked the whole room and at last found it under the pillow. He wanted to carry it to the rabbi, but I knelt before him and begged him not to do so, as he would not allow me to sing any more and deprive me of the love people have for me and my singing. Father seemed struck by my remark because he is proud that a son of his, and one so young in years, holds such a position, and thinks also that when his son sings and prays before the Lord, the Lord will prosper him in his business and forgive all his sins. So he did not take the book to the rabbi, but thrust it into the fire and when it burned and crackled, he leaped and danced for joy."

"And you, Eliezer, you looked on, and did nothing?"

"What could I do?" whispered the singer.

"I should have put the book on my breast, protected it with my arms, and said to the father, 'If you wish to burn it, burn me with it.'"

Meir said this with indignation, almost anger, against his friend.

Eliezer stood before him with downcast eyes, sad and humbled. "I could not," he whispered, "I was afraid they would deprive me of my office and denounce me as an infidel. But look at me, Meir, and judge from it how I loved our Master; since he was taken away from me, my face has shrunk and my eyes are red from tears."

"Oh! tears! tears! tears!" exclaimed Meir throwing himself upon a chair and pressing his throbbing temples with both hands, "always those tears and tears!" he repeated with a half-sarcastic, half-sorrowful voice. "You may weep forever, and do no good either to yourself or others. Eliezer! I love you, even as a brother; but I do not like your tears and do not care to look at your reddened eyes. Eliezer, do not show me tears any more, show me eyes full of fire and a powerful voice. The people love you and would follow you like a child its mother." Scolding and upbraiding his friend, Meir's eyes betrayed a moisture which not wishing to betray he buried his face in both hands. "Oh Eliezer! what have you done to give up that book? Where shall we go now for advice and comfort? Where shall we find another teacher? The flames have consumed the soul of our souls and the ashes have been thrown to the winds. If the spirit of the Master saw it, he will say: 'My people have cursed me again,'" and tears dropped through his fingers upon the rough deal table. Suddenly, he stopped his laments and changing his position fell into a deep reverie.

Eliezer opened the window,

The sandy ground of the market square seemed divided in long slanting paths of red and gold, by the rays of the rising sun. Along one of these shiny paths towards Kamionker's house came a powerful, barefooted man. His heavy step sounded near the window where the two young men were sitting, Meir raised his head, the man had passed already but the short glimpse of the matted red hair and swollen face was enough for Meir to identify him as the carrier Jochel.

A few minutes later two men dressed in black passed near the window. One of them was tall, stately, and smiling, the other slightly stooping had iron-gray hair and a wrinkled brow. They were Moreine Kalman and Abram Ezofovitch. They evidently had not crossed the square but passed along the back streets almost stealthily as if to avoid being seen. Both disappeared in the entrance of Kamionker's house, where Jochel had preceded them. Eliezer looked up from his book where he had been reading.

"Meir," he said, "why do you look so stern, I have never seen you look so stern before."

Meir did not seem to have heard his friend's remark.

His eyes were fixed upon the floor, and he murmured,—

"My uncle Abram! my uncle Abram! woe to our house, shame and ignominy to the house of Ezofovitch!"

In the next room, divided from Eliezer's by a thin wall, loud voices and bustle were audible. Jankiel shouted at his wife to go away and take the children with her. Jenka's low shoes clattered upon the floor and the suddenly roused children began to squall. By degrees the noise sounded fainter and farther off. Then the floor resounded with the steps of men, chairs were drawn together, and a lively discussion in low yet audible voices began. Meir suddenly rose.

"Eliezer!" he whispered, "let us go away."

"Why should we go away?" said the young man, raising his head from his book.

"Because the walls are thin," began Meir.

He did not finish, because from the other side of the wall came the violent exclamation from his uncle Abram,—

"I did not know anything about that; you did not tell me, Jankiel."

The mirthless, bilious cackle of Jankiel interrupted, "I know a thing or two," he exclaimed, "knew that you Abram, would not easily agree to it. I shall manage that without your help."

"Hush!" hissed Kalman. The voices dropped again to a whisper.

"Eliezer, go away!" insisted Meir.

The singer did not seem to understand.

"Eliezer! do you want to honor your father, as it is commanded from Sinai?"

Kamionker's son sighed.

"I pray to Jehovah that I may honor him."

Meir grasped him by the hand.

"Then go at once! go! if you stop here any longer you will never be able to honor your father again!" He spoke so impressively that Eliezer grew pale and began to tremble.

"How can I go now, if they are discussing secrets there?" The voice of Jankiel became again distinctly audible: 'The chaiet Izmul is desperately poor, the carrier Jockel is a thief,—both will be well paid.

"And the peasants who carted the spirit?" asked Abram. Jankiel laughed.

"They are safe; their souls and bodies and everything that belongs to them is pledged to my innkeepers."

"Hush!" whispered again the phlegmatic, therefore cautious, Kalman.

Eliezer trembled more and more. A ray of light had pierced his dreamy brain.

"Meir! Meir!" he whispered "how can I get away? I am afraid to cross the room, they might think I had overheard their secrets."

Meir with one hand pushed the table from the window, and with the other helped his friend to push through. In a second, Eliezer had disappeared from the room. Meir drew himself up and murmured,—

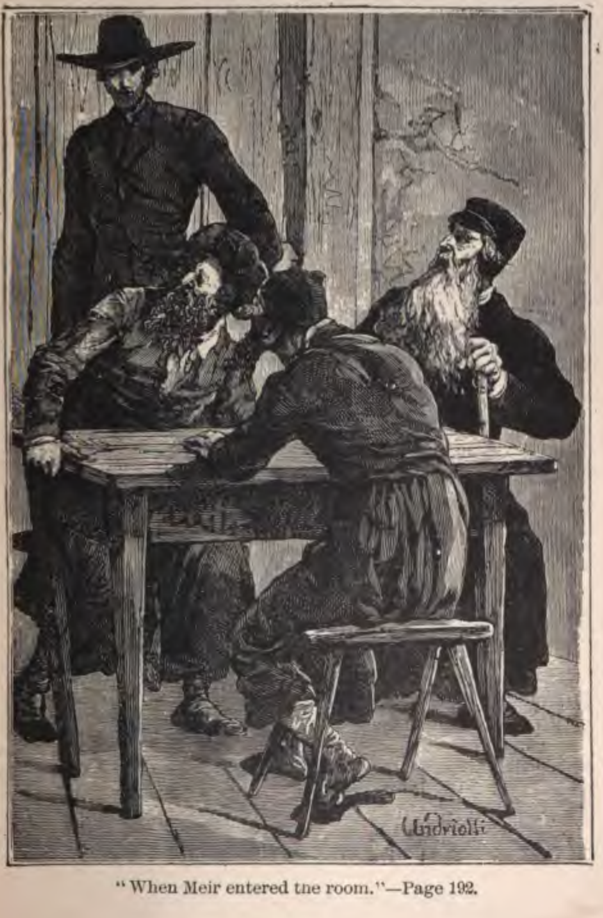
"I will show myself now and let them know that somebody has heard their conversation."

Then he opened the low door and entered into the next room. There near the wall, on three chairs closely drawn together, sat three men. A small table stood between them. Kalman, in his satin garment, looked calm and self-possessed. Jankiel and Abram rested their elbows on the table. The first was red with excitement and his eyes glittered with a malicious, greedy light; the latter looked pale and troubled, and kept his eyes fixed upon the floor; but nothing was capable of disturbing the smiling equanimity of Kalman. .When Meir entered the room he heard distinctly his uncle's word,—

"And if the whole place burns down with the spirit vaults?"

"Ah! ah!" sneered Jankiel, "what does it matter? one Edomite more will become a beggar!"

Here the speaker stopped and began to shake as if in rage or terror. He saw Meir coming into the room. His two companions also saw him. Kalman's mouth opened wide. Abram looked threatening, but his eyes fell before the bold yet sorrowful glance of his nephew, and his hands began to tremble. Meir slowly crossed the room and



" When Meir entered the room."—Page 192.

entered into the next, where Jochel stood near the stove staring absently at his bare toes.

Jankiel sent a malediction after the retreating figure. The two others were silent.

"Why did you bring us in such an unsafe place?" asked at last Kalman, in his even voice.

"Why did you not warn us that somebody might hear from the other side of the wall?" said Abram impetuously. Jankiel explained that it was his son's room who did not know anything about business and never paid the slightest attention to what was going on around him.

"How would I know that cursed lad was there; he must have entered like a thief, through the window. Well!" he said, after a while, "what does it matter if he heard? He is an Israelite, one of us, and dare not betray his own people."

"He may dare," repeated Kalman, "but we will keep an eye upon him, and if he as much as breathes a syllable of what he heard we will crush him."

Abram rose.

"You may do what you like," he said impulsively. "I wash my hands of the whole business."

Jankiel eyed him with a malicious expression."

"Very well," he said, "in that case, there will be all the more for us two. Those who risk will get the money." Abram sat down again. His nervous face betrayed the inward struggle. Jankiel, who had a piece of chalk in his hand, began writing on a black tablet,—

"Eight thousand gallons of spirit at four roubles the gallon makes thirty-two thousand roubles. These divided into three make ten thousand six hundred sixty-six roubles sixty-six and one third kopecks. Six hundred roubles to each of the two, Jochel and Izmul, and there remains for each of us ten thousand sixty-six roubles, sixty-six and one third kopecks." Abram rose again. He did not speak but twisted his handkerchief convulsively with both hands. Then he raised his eyes and asked,—

"And when will it come off?"

"It will come off very soon" said Jankiel.

Abram said nothing further, and without saying good-bye, swiftly left the room.

The large market square showed signs of life. Long strings of carts and people began arriving from all directions. Inside the houses and shops, everybody was busy preparing for the day's business.

CHAPTER V.

In Ezofovitch's house the inmates had risen earlier than usual on this day. The part of the home inhabited by Rafael and Ber with their families resounded with gay and lively conversation. Various objects of trade, with their corresponding money value were mentioned. Sometimes the calculations were interrupted by remarks in feminine voices which occasioned laughter or gay exclamations. Everything showed the peace and contentment of people who strove after the well-being of their families and lived in mutual confidence and harmony.

The large sitting-room smelt of pine branches which were scattered upon the even cleaner than usually floor. On the old-fashioned high-backed sofa, before a table spread with fine linen, sat old Saul and sipped his fragrant tea. The huge samovar had been taken down from the cupboard and gleamed with red coals and hissed and steamed in the next room, where a large kitchen fire illuminated the long table and white scrubbed benches. The steaming of the samovar, the great kitchen fire and fresh curtains everywhere, together with the unusual stir of all the inmates, showed distinctly that many visitors were expected and preparations made accordingly.

But it was yet early in the day and Saul sat alone, relishing evidently the atmosphere of well-being and orderliness and the sounds of the busy life filling the house from top to basement. It was one of those moments, not rare by any means in Saul's life, when he realized the many blessings which the Lord had bestowed upon his house and gladdened his old age with.

Suddenly the door opened and Meir entered. The happy expression vanished from Saul's wrinkled face. The sight of the grandson reminded him of the thorn which lurked amidst the flowers. The very look of the young man acted as a false or stormy accord amidst a gay and peaceful melody. Trouble was depicted on his pale face, and his eyes looked indignant and angry. He entered boldly and quickly, but meeting the eyes of his grandfather he bent his head and his step became lower. Formerly he used to approach his father and benefactor with the confidence and tenderness of a favorite child. Now he felt that between him and the old man there rose a barrier, which became higher and harder every day. He knew it was he himself who, by words and deeds, had raised that barrier, and his heart yearned for the old love and for a kind look from the old man, who met his eyes with a stern and angry face; he approached him, therefore, timidly, and said in a sad, entreating voice,—

"Zeide! I should like to speak with you about important business."

The humble attitude of the once favorite child mollified the old man; he looked less stern, and said shortly but gently, "Speak out."

"Zeide, permit me to shut the door and windows so that nobody hears what I have to say."

"Shut them," replied Saul, and waited with troubled face for the grandson to begin."

Meir, after shutting the door and windows, came close to his grandfather and began,—

"Zeide! I know that my words will bring you trouble and sorrow, but I have nobody to go to; you were to me father and mother, and when in trouble I come to you." His voice shook perceptibly. The grandfather softened.

"Tell me everything; though I have reason to be angry with you, because you are not what I should like to see you, I cannot forget that you are the son of my son who left me so early. If you have troubles I will take them from you, if anybody has wronged you, I will stand up for you and punish him."

These words soothed and comforted the young man.

"Zeide!" he said in a bolder tone, "thanks to you, I have no troubles of my own and nobody has wronged me. But I have come across a terrible secret and do not know what to do with it, as I cannot keep it concealed. I thought I would tell you, so that you, zeide, with the authority of your gray hair might prevent a great crime and a great shame."

Saul looked at his grandson half anxiously half curiously.

"It is better people should not know any secrets or trouble about any, but I know if you do not speak to me, you will speak to somebody else and troubles might come from it. Say, then, what is that terrible secret?"

Meir answered.

"This is the secret: Jankiel Kamionker, as you know, zeide, rents the distillery from the Lord of Kamionka. He distilled during the season six thousand gallons of spirits, but did not sell any as prices were low. Now prices have risen and he wants to sell, but does not want to pay the high government taxes.

"Speak lower"—interrupted Saul, whose face betrayed great uneasiness."

Meir lowered his voice, almost to a whisper.

"In order not to pay the taxes, Kamionker last night carted away all the spirits to the Karaite's hill, where his innkeepers from all parts, came to bargain for it and buy it up. But he thought what would become of him if the government officials came down to visit the vaults and did not find the spirits. He would be held answerable and punished. Then he hired two people. 'Zeide! he tempted two miserable outcasts to—"

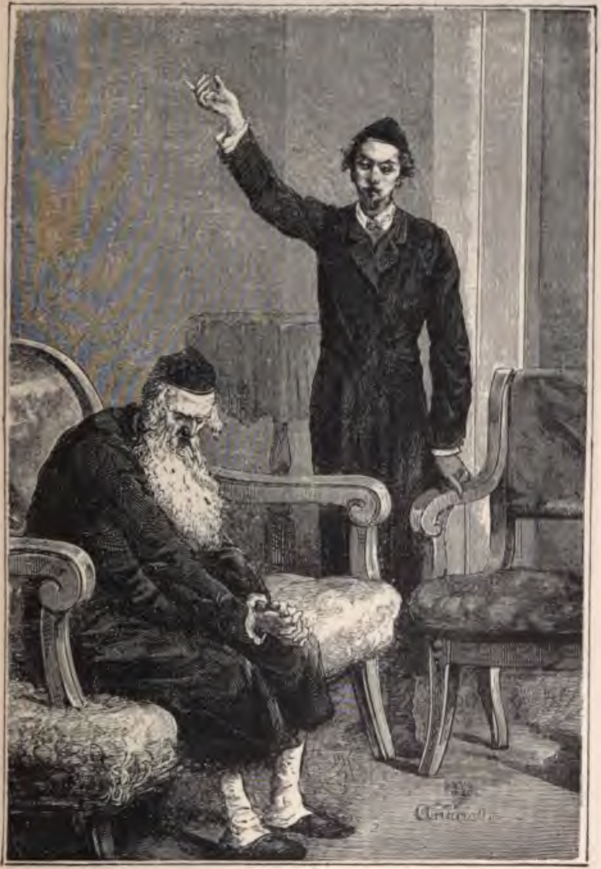
"Hush!" exclaimed Saul, in a low voice. "Be quiet, do not say a word more. I can guess the rest."

The old man's hands trembled and his shaggy eyebrows bristled in a heavy frown.

Meir was silent and looked with expectant eyes at his grandfather.

"Your mouth has spoken what is not true; it cannot be true."

"Zeide!" whispered Meir, "it is as true as the sun in heaven." "Have you not heard, zeide, of the accidents that happened last year and last year but one? Thes accidents are getting more and more numerous, and ever true Israelite deplores it, and reddens with shame!"



" It is as true as the sun in heaven!"—Page 198.

"How can you know all this? How can you understand these things? I do not believe you."

"How do I know and understand it. Zeide, I have been brought up in your house, where many people come to see you; Jews and Christians, merchants and lords, rich and poor. They talked with you and I listened. Why should I not understand?" Saul was silent, and his troubled countenance betrayed many conflicting thoughts. A sudden anger toward the grandson stirred his blood.

"You understand too much! you are too inquisitive. Your spirit is full of restlessness, and you carry trouble with you wherever you go. I felt so happy to-day until my eye fell upon you and black care entered with you into the room."

Meir hung his head.

"Zeide," he said sadly, "why do you reproach me? It is not about my own affairs I came to you."

"And what right have you to meddle with affairs that are not your own?" said Saul, with hesitation in his voice.

"They are our own, zeide. Kamionker is an Israelite, and as such ought not to cast a slur on our race; besides, they are our own, still more because your son, zeide, Abram belongs to it."

"My son Abram?"

Saul rose suddenly from the sofa and fell back again. Then he fixed his penetrating eyes upon Meir.

"Are you speaking the truth?" he asked, sternly.

"I have seen and heard it all myself," whispered Meir.

Saul remained thinking a long time.

"Well," he said, slowly, "you have the right to accuse your uncle. He is your father's brother, and from his deed shame and ignominy might come upon our house. The family of Ezofovitch never did dishonorable things. I shall forbid Abram to have anything to do with it."

"Zeide! tell also Kamionker and Kalman not to do it."

"You are foolish," said Saul; "are Kamionker and Kalman my sons or my daughters' husbands? They would not listen to me."

"If they do not listen, zeide," exclaimed Meir, "denounce them before the owner of Kamionka or before the law."

Saul looked at his grandson with flaming eyes.

"Your advice is that of a foolish boy. Would you have your old grandfather turn informant, and bring calamity upon his own brethren?"

He wanted to say something more, but the door opened to admit several visitors; they were Israelites from the country, grave merchants or farmers from the neighboring estates, arrived for the great fair. Saul half rose to welcome his guests, who quickly stepping up to him, pressed his hand in hearty greeting, and explained that it was not so much business as the desire to see the wise and honored Saul, which had brought them to town. Saul answered with an equally polite speech, and asked them to be seated round the table, and without leaving his own seat on the sofa, clapped his bony hands. At this signal a buxom servant girl came in, with glasses of steaming tea, which filled the whole room with its subtle aroma. The guests thanked him smilingly, and then began a lively conversation about familiar subjects.

Meir saw that he would have no further opportunity of seeing his grandfather alone, and quickly left the room and went into the kitchen. This also was full of visitors, but of another class than those in the sitting-room. Upon the benches, near the wall, sat some fifteen men in old worn-out garments, and Sara, Saul's daughter, and Rafael's wife, Saul's daughter-in-law, conversed with them and offered tea or mead, and other refreshments.

The men responded gayly, if somewhat timidly, and accepted the refreshments with humble thanks. Most of them were innkeepers, dairy farmers, or small tradesmen from the country. Their dark, lean faces and rough hands betrayed poverty and hard work. The smallest expense for food, during their stay in town, would have made a difference to them. They went, therefore, straight to Ezofovitch's house, whose doors were always hospitably open on such days, as had been the custom of the family for hundreds of years.

The two women, in their silk gowns, and bright caps, flitted to and fro between the huge fireplace and the grateful visitors. Outside the house there was another class of visitors, those were the very poorest, who had not come to buy or to sell at the fair, but to obtain some wine and food out of the charity of their wealthier brethren. To these the servant carried bread and clotted milk, and small copper coins. The murmur of their thanks and blessings penetrated to the kitchen, where the two busy women smiled yet more contentedly, and produced more small coins from their capacious pockets.

In another part of the roomy kitchen or rather living room, stood the children of the house, pleased with their pretty dresses and coral necklaces, eating sweets. The elder boys listened to the conversation of the men, and a few of the younger children played on the floor. Close to this group sat the great grandmother, Freida. Days like this conveyed to her clouded memory, pictures of the past, when she herself, a happy wife and mother, looked after the comforts of her numerous guests. The great-granddaughters had roused her earlier to-day than usual, and dressed her in the costliest garments, and now, before she would be led into the sitting-room to her chair near the window, they were completing her toilette. The black-eyed Lia fastened the diamond star into the turban, her younger sister arranged the pendants, another put around the wrinkled neck, the costly pearls and twisted the golden chain cunningly amidst the soft folds of the white apron. Doing this they smiled and drew back a little to admire the effect of their handiwork, or peered roguishly into the great grandmother's eyes and kissed her on the forehead. The men sitting round the wall nodded their heads sympathetically, looked reverentially at the old lady and now and then exclamations of wonder and pleasure at seeing the old lady surrounded by such tender care, escaped their lips.

The other part of the house which had been so lively early in the morning, was now silent and deserted. Meir crossed the narrow passage which divided the house, and opened the door of his uncle Rafael's rooms, and met upon the threshold his friend and cousin Chaim. The youthful, almost childish face, surrounded by golden hair, looked beaming and excited.

"Where is Uncle Rafael?" asked Meir.

"Where should he be? He is at the fair together with Ber, buying bullocks."

"And you, Chaim, where are you going?"

But the lad did not even hear the question; trilling a gay song he had rushed off where the stir and lively spectacle of the fair attracted him.

Meir went out into the porch and looked around. The fair had scarcely begun, but in the midst of some forty carts he saw Ber discussing the prices of the cattle with the peasants. Farther on a little, he saw Rafael standing in the porch of one of the houses surrounded by merchants, evidently discussing business, as all their fingers were in motion. To approach these two men, who after his grandfather, had the greatest authority in the family, and engage them in private talk was impossible. Meir saw that and did not even try.

The sight of the motley crowd, where everybody was engaged upon some business of his own, looked to him strange and unreal. His thoughts were so different from any thoughts which moved that busy multitude.

"Why should it trouble me?" he murmured. "What can I do?" And yet it seemed to him impossible to wait in passive inactivity until a red glare in the sky should announce that the nefarious design had been accomplished.

"What wrong has the man ever done us?" he said to himself. He was thinking of the owner of Kamionka.

His dull, listless eyes rested upon the porch of Witebski's house, and he saw the merchant himself standing and smoking leisurely a cigar. He looked at the lively scene with the eyes of a man who has nothing whatever to do with it. The fact is, he dealt in timber which he bought in large quantities from the estates, therefore the fair had no special attraction for him. Besides, he considered himself too refined and thought too highly of his own business, to mix with a crowd occupied with selling and buying corn or cattle.

Meir descended the steps and went away towards Witebski, who seeing him, smiled and stretched out a friendly hand.

"A rare visitor! a rare visitor," he exclaimed. "But I know that you could not come sooner to see the parents of your betrothed. We heard how the severe grandfather ordered you to sit in Bet-ha-Midrash to read the Talmud. Well, it does not matter much, does it? The zeide is a dear old man and did not mean it unkindly, just as you did not mean to do any wrong. Young people will now and then cut over the traces. Come into the drawing-room, I will call my wife and she will make you welcome as a dear son-in-law."

The worldly-wise merchant spoke smilingly, and holding Meir by the hand, led him into the drawing-room. There before the green sofa he stood still and looked archly into Meir's face and said,—

"It is very praiseworthy, Meir, that you are bashful and shy of your future wife, I was the same at your age, and all young men ought to feel like that; but my daughter has been brought up in the world, where customs are somewhat different. She is wondering and sad that she does not know even the fiancé who is to be her husband within a month. I will go and bring her here. Nobody need know you are together, I will shut the door and window, and you can have a quiet talk together and make each other's acquaintance." He was moving towards the door, but Meir grasped him by the sleeve.

"Rebe!" he said, "I am not thinking of betrothals or weddings, I came to you on a different errand altogether.'

Witebski looked sharply at the grave and pale face of the young man and his brow became slightly clouded.

"It is not about my own affairs I have come to you, Rebe—," the merchant quickly interrupted,—

"If it be neither your affair nor mine, why enter it?"

"There are affairs," said the young man "which belong to everybody, and it is everybody's duty to think and speak of them."

He was thinking of public affairs, but though he did not express himself in these words, he felt all their importance.

"I have come across an awful secret to-day."

Witebski jumped up from the easy chair where he was sitting.

"I do not want to hear about any awful secrets! Why should you come to me about it, when I am not curious to know anything?"

"I want you, Rebe, to prevent a terrible deed."

"And why should I prevent anything; why do you come to me about it?"

"Because you are rich and respected, and know how to speak. You live in peace and friendship with everybody; even the great rabbi smiles when he sees you. Your words can do much if you only would.——"

"But I will not," interrupted Witebski in a determined voice and with clouded brow. "I am rich and live in peace with everybody;" and lowering his voice, he added, "If I began to peer into people's secrets and thwarted them, I should be neither rich nor live in peace with anybody, and things would not have gone so well with me as they are going now."

"Rebe!" said Meir, "I am glad that everything is prospering with you, but I should not care for prosperity if it were the result of wrongdoing."

"Who speaks about wrongdoing?" said Eli, brightening up again. "I wrong no man, I deal honestly with everybody I do business with, and they are satisfied and feel friendly towards me. Thanks to the Lord, I can look everybody in the face, and upon the fortune I leave my children, there are no human tears or human wrongs."

Meir bent his head respectfully.

"I know it, Rebe. You are fair and honest, and carry on your business with the wise intelligence the Lord gave you, and bring honor upon Israel. But I think if a man be honest himself, he ought not to look indifferently upon other people's villainy; and if he do not prevent it when he can, it is as bad as if he had done it himself. I have heard that a great wrong is going to be done by an Israelite to an innocent man. I can do nothing to prevent it and I am looking for somebody who might be able to save an innocent man from a great calamity."

Here quite unexpectedly a loud and jovial laugh interrupted Meir's speech and Witebski patted him playfully on the shoulder.

"Well, well," he said, "I see what you are driving at.

You are a hot-headed youth and want to take some trouble out of your own head and put it into mine. Thank you for the gift, but I will none of it. Let things be, why should we spoil our lives when it could be made so pleasant? There sit ye down, and I will go and bring your fiancée. You have never heard her play on the piano, ah! but she can play well. It is not the Sabbath and she will play and you can listen a little."

He said this in his most lively manner, and moved towards the door; but again Meir arrested his steps.

"Rebe!" he said, "listen at least to what I have to say."

There was a gleam of impatience in Witebski's eyes.

"Ah, Meir! what an obstinate fellow you are, wanting to force your elders to do or hear things they do not want to. Well, I forgive you, and now let me go and bring the young woman."

Meir barred him the way.

"Rebe!" he said, "I will not let you go before you have heard me. I have nobody else to go to, everybody is occupied with business or visitors. You alone, Rebe, have time."

He stopped, because the merchant laid his hand upon the young man's shoulder; he did not smile any longer, but looked grave and displeased.

"Listen, Meir," he said, "I will tell you one thing. You have taken a wrong turning altogether. People shake their heads and speak badly of you; but I am indulgent with you. I make allowance because you are young and because I am not of the same way of thinking as the people here; and know that many things in Israel are not as they ought to be. I think it; but do not speak about it or show it. Why should I expose myself to their ill-feeling? What can I do? If it be the Lord who ordered it so, why should I offend Him and make Him turn against me? If it be people's doing, other people will come in time to set it right. My business is to look after my family and their well-being. I am not a judge or a rabbi either; therefore I keep quiet, try to please God and the people, and be in nobody's way. These are my principles and I wish they were yours also, Meir. I should not give advice to you either and let you go your own way; but since you are to be my son-in-law, I must keep my eye upon you."

"Rebe!" interrupted Meir, whose eyelids quivered with suppressed irîtation, "do not be angry with me or think me rude, but I cannot marry your daughter: I shall never be her husband."

Witebski turned rigid with amazement.

"Do we hear aright?" he said, after a while. "Did not your grandfather pledge you to her and send the betrothal gifts?"

"My grandfather agreed with you about it," said Meir, in a trembling voice—"but he did it against my wish."

"Well," said Witebski with the greatest amazement "and what have you to say against my daughter?"

"I have no feelings against her, Rebe, but my heart is not drawn to her. She also does not care for me. The other day, when passing your house, I heard her crying and lamenting that they wanted her to marry a common ignorant Jew. Maybe I am a common, ignorant Jew, but her education is likewise not to my taste. Why should you wish to bind us? We are not children, and know what our heart desires and what it does not desire."

Witebski still looked at the young man in utter bewilderment, and raising both hands to his head exclaimed indignantly,—

"Did my ears not deceive me? You do not want my daughter, my beautiful, educated Mera?"

A hot blush had mounted to his forehead. The gentle diplomatist and man of the world had disappeared, only the outraged father remained.

At the same time the door was violently thrown open, and upon the threshold, with a very red face and blazing eyes, stood Mistress Hana.

She had been evidently at her toilette which was only partly completed. Instead of her silk gown she wore a short, red petticoat and gray jacket. The front of her wig was carefully dressed, but a loose braid fastened by a string dangled gracefully on her back.

She stood upon the threshold and gasped out,—

"I have heard everything."

She could not say any more from excitement. Her breast heaved and her face was fiery red. At last she rushed with waving arms at Meir, and shouted,—

"What is that? You refuse my daughter! You, a common, stupid Jew from Szybow, do not wish to marry a beautiful, educated girl like my Mera? Fie upon you for an idiot and a profligate!"

Witebski tried in vain to mitigate the fury of his better half.

"Hush, Hana! hush," he said, holding her by the elbow.

But all the breeding and distinguished manners upon which Mistress Hana prided herself had vanished. She shook her clenched fist close into Meir's face.

"You do not want Mera, my beautiful daughter? Aï! aï! the great misfortune," she sneered, "it will certainly kill us with grief. She will cry her eyes out after the ignorant Jew from Szybow. I shall take her to Wilna and marry her to a count, a general, or to a prince. You think that because your grandfather is rich and you have money of your own, you can do what you like. I will show your grandfather and all your family that I care for them as much as for an old slipper."

Eli carefully closed the door and windows. Mistress Hana rushed toward a stand of drawers, opened it and took out, one after the other, the velvet-lined boxes, and throwing them at Meir's feet exclaimed,—

"There, take your presents and carry them to the beggar girl you are consorting with; she will be just the wife for you."

"Hush!" hissed out, almost despairingly, the husband, and he stooped down to pick up the boxes; but Mistress Hana tore them out of his hands.

"I will carry them myself to his grandfather and break off the engagement."

"Hana!" persuaded the husband, "you will only make matters worse, I will take them myself and speak with Saul."

Hana did not even hear what he said.

"For shame!" she cried out "the madman, the profligate, to prefer the Karaitist girl to my daughter. Well, the Lord be thanked we have got rid of him ; now I shall take my daughter to Wilna and marry her to a great nobleman."

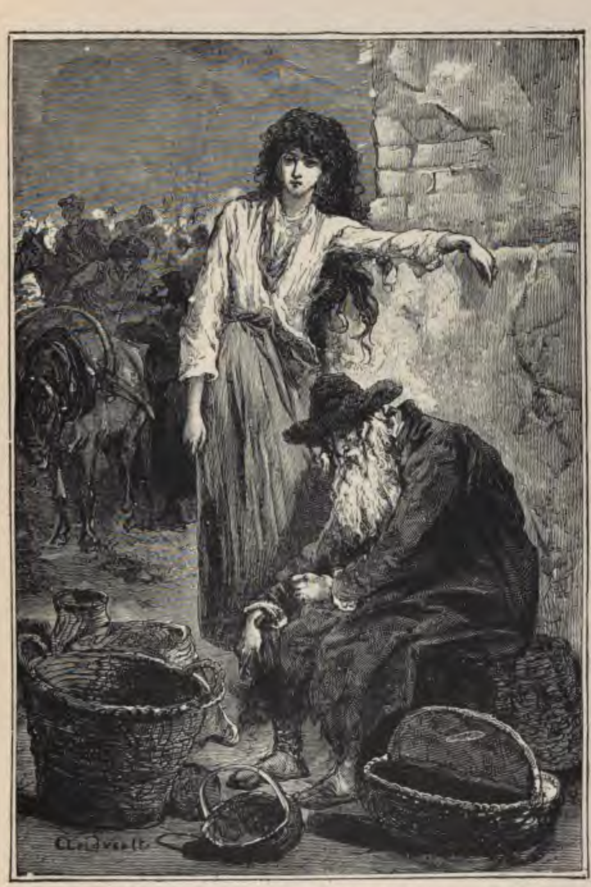
CHAPTER VI.

It was about noon when Meir left Witebski's house, pursued by the curses and scoldings of its mistress and the gentle remonstrances and conciliatory words of Eli. The fair was now in full swing. The large market square was full of vehicles of all kinds, animals and people, that it seemed as if nobody could pass or find room any longer. In one part of the square where the crowd was less dense, close to the wall of a large building, sat an old man surrounded by baskets of all shapes and sizes.

It was Abel Karaim.

Though the day was warm and sunny his head was covered with a fur cap, from under which streamed his white hair and his beard spread like a fan over his breast. The sun fell upon the small and thin face, scarcely visible from under the hair, and the fur which fell over the shaggy eyebrows gave but little protection to the dim eyes blinking in the sun.

Close to him, slim and erect, stood Golda, with her corals encircling the slender neck setting off the clear olive of her complexion and the heavy black tresses falling down her back. A few steps before these two, stood long rows of carts full of grain, wood and various country produce; between the carts, bullocks and cows lowed, calves bleated, horses neighed and stamped, small brokers and horsedealers



"Sat an old man surrounded by baskets of shapes and sizes."
Page 212.

flitted to and fro bargaining with the peasants. In this hubbub of voices in midst of bargaining and quarrels mixed with the shrill voices of women and squalling children sounded the quavering voice of the old Abel unweariedly at his task of reciting. The surging elements around did not distract him, on the contrary they seemed to stimulate him as his voice sounded louder and more distinct.

"When Moses descended from Mount Sinai, a great light shone from his face and the people fell down on their faces and called out as in one voice: Moses repeat to us the words of the Eternal. And a great calm came upon the earth and the heavens. They grew silent, the lightning ceased, and the wind fell: And Moses called the seventy elders of Israel and when they surrounded him, as the stars surround the moon, he repeated to them the words of the Eternal."

At this moment, two grave men, poorly dressed, came from the crowd and passed close by him.

"He is reciting again," said one.

"He always does," said the other.

They smiled, but did not go further. An old woman and some younger people joined them. The woman stood listening and asked,—

"What is it he is telling?"

"The history and the covenant of the Israelites," replied Golda.

The young people opened their mouths, the woman drew nearer, the men smiled, but all stood still and listened.

"When the people heard the commandments of the Lord, they called out as in one voice, We will do all that the Lord commands. And Moses erected twelve stones against the Mountain of Sinaï, and said unto the people: Keep therefore the words of this covenant; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Israel.

"Your little ones, your wives, and the stranger that is in thy camp, from the hewer of thy wood unto the drawer of thy water."

"He says beautiful things and speaks well," said one.

"And the hewer of thy wood and the drawer of thy water," repeated two poorly dressed men and raised their shining eyes to heaven. The woman, who had listened attentively, drew from her shabby gown a dirty handkerchief, and undoing one of the knots, deposited a big copper coin on Abel's knees.

A few more had joined the little group which surrounded Abel, Jews, Christians, and young people. These few had torn themselves away from the noisy, haggling crowd and listened to other words than that of roubles and kopecks, the sounds of the far Past. It seemed almost as if Abel felt the attention of the people, and as if all these eyes fixed upon him warmed his heart and stirred his memory. His eyes shone brighter from under the half closed eyelids, the fur cap pushed at the back of his head, and the long white hair falling upon breast and shoulder, gave him the air of a half-blind bard, who, with his national songs, rouses and gladdens the spirit of the people. In a louder and steadier voice he went on:—

"When the Israelites crossed the Jordan, Joshua erected two great stones and wrote upon them the ten commandments. One half of the people rested under Mount Gerisim, the other half under Mount Ebal, and the voice spoke unto all men. He breaks the covenant of the Lord who worships false gods, he who does not honor his father and mother. He breaks the covenant who covets his neighbor's property and leads astray the blind. He breaks it who wrongs the stranger, the orphan and the widow; he who putteth a lie into his brother's ear, and sayeth of the innocent, let him die. And when the people of Israel heard it they called out, as if in one voice, All that thou commandest, we will do."

"Amen," murmured around Abel the voices which a short time before had haggled desperately over their small bargains. A peasant woman pushed through the little group, picked up one of the baskets and asked after the price. Golda told her, after which the woman began to bargain, but Golda did not answer again, not because she did not want to, as rather that she did not hear the shrill voice any longer. Her eyes were fixed upon one point in the crowd, a hot blush suffused her features, and a half childish half passionate smile played upon her lips. She saw Meir making his way through the crowd and coming near where she stood; but he did not see her, his face looked troubled and restless, and presently he disappeared within the precincts of the synagogue. These were almost as crowded as the market square, but not so noisy. Meir went towards the dwelling of Rabbi Todros; all the people were moving in the same direction. Close to the rabbi's little hut the crowd was still denser, but there was no noise, no pushing or eyes shining with the greediness of gain; a grave silence prevailed everywhere, interrupted only by timid whispers. Meir knew what brought the people here and where they came from. There were scarcely any inhabitants of Szybow amongst them, as these could always see the rabbi and come to him for advice. They came mostly from the country around; some from far distant places. There was a slight sprinkling of merchants and well-to-do people, but the great bulk bore the stamp of poverty and hard work in their lean, patient faces, and upon their garments.

"Why should I go there?" said Meir to himself, "he will not listen to me now; but where else can I go?" he added after awhile, and again mixed with the crowd who bore him onwards till he found himself before the wide-open door of the rabbi's dwelling.

Beyond the door, in the entrance, people stood closely pressed together like a living or rather breathing wall, as no other sound than their long-drawn breaths was audible. Meir tried to push his way through, which did not present great difficulties, as many of the poor people had been humble guests at Ezofovitch's, and recognizing Saul's grandson, made room for him. They did this in a quick, absent-minded way, because their eyes were riveted upon the room beyond; they stood upon tiptoe, and whenever they caught a broken sentence, their faces glowed with happiness as if the honored sage's words were balm for all the sorrows of their lives.

The interior of the room, which Meir beheld from the open door, presented a singular appearance. In the depth of it, between the wall and a table, sat Rabbi Todros in his usual worn-out garments, with his cap pushed on the back of his head. The upper part of his body bent forward, he sat perfectly motionless except for his eyes, which roamed along the people, who looked at him humbly and beseechingly. There was a small space between the sage and those that stood before him, which none dared to cross without permission. The whole scene was lighted up by the rays of the sun streaming in through the window on one side, on the other by the lurid and fitful flames of the fireplace. Near the latter crouched the melamed, feeding the flame with fresh fuel and putting various herbs into steaming vessels.

Besides the function of apothecary, he joined also the office of crier. He called out the names of the people who, according to his opinion, were entitled to appear before the master.

He now raised his thick forefinger towards the entrance and called out,—

"Shimshel, the innkeeper."

The summoned man, whose name, Samson, time and custom had transformed into Shimshel, did not resemble in the least his namesake, the historical Samson. He was slender and red-haired, and bent almost to the ground before the rabbi.

"Who greets the Wise Man bows before the greatness of the Creator," he said in a timid, shaking voice. It was not only his voice which shook, but all his limbs, and his blue eyes roamed wildly about the room.

Isaac Todros sat like a statue. His eyes looked piercingly at the little red-haired man before him, who in his terror, had lost his tongue altogether.

"Well?" said the sage, after a lengthy pause.

Shimshel raised his shoulders almost to his ears and began,—

"Nasi! let a ray of your wisdom enlighten my darkness. I have committed a great sin, and my soul trembles while I am confessing it before you. Nasi! I am a most unfortunate man; my wife Ryfka has lost my soul forever, unless you, oh rabbi, tell me how to make it clean again."

Here, the poor penitent choked again, but gathering courage, proceeded,—

"Nasi! I and my wife Ryfka and the children sat down, last Friday, to the Sabbath feast. On one table, there was a dish of meat, on the other a bowl of milk, which my wife had boiled for the younger children. My wife ladled out the milk for the children, when her hand shook and a drop of milk fell upon the meat."

"Aï! aï! stupid woman, what had she done! She had made the meat unclean."

Shimshel choked again, and stopped. The sage, still motionless, asked,—

"Well, and what did you do with the meat?"

The questioned man's head sank upon his breast, and he stammered,—

"Rabbi, I ate from it, and so did my wife and children."

The rabbi's eyes flashed with anger.

"Why did you not throw the unclean food on the refuse heap? Why did you make your mouth and the mouths of your family unclean?" shouted the rabbi.

"Nasi! I am very poor, and keep a small inn which brings but little profit. I have six children, an old father who lives with me, and two orphaned grandchildren, whose parents died. Rabbi! it is difficult to find food for so many mouths, and we have meat only once a week. Koscher meat is very dear, so I buy three pounds every week, and eleven people have to keep up their strength on it. Rabbi! I knew we should have nothing during the week, except bread and onions and cucumber. I was loth to throw that meat away and so I ate from it, and allowed my family to eat from it."

Thus complained and confessed the poor Samson, and the master listened with clouded brows.

Then he spoke, transfixing the sinner with angry eyes. He explained in a long and learned speech the origin of the law of clean and unclean food. How great and wise men, had written many commentaries about it, and how great the sin of a man was who dared to eat a piece of meat upon which a drop of milk had fallen. "Your sin is abominable in the eyes of the Lord," he thundered at the humble penitent. "For the sake of greediness you have broken the covenant, which Jehovah made with his people, and transgressed one of the six hundred and thirteen commandments, which every true Israelite is bound to keep. You deserve to be cursed even as Elisha cursed the mocking children, and Joshua the town of Jericho. But since it was only your body which sinned, whilst the spirit remained faithful, and you came to me and confessed and humbled yourself, I will forgive you, under the condition that you and your family abstain from meat and milk during four weeks, and the money saved therefrom distributed amongst the poor. And after four weeks, when your souls will be clean again from the abomination, you may dwell in peace and piety amongst your brethren Israelites."

"Say everybody Amen."

"Amen," called the people within the room and without, and those who pressed their eager faces against the window.

The little red-haired Samson, relieved from the burden which oppressed his conscience, though otherwise burdened with a four-weeks' fast, murmured his thanks and retreated towards the entrance.

Reb Mosze again raised his finger and called out,—

"Reb Gerson, melamed."

At his summons, a round-backed, middle-sized man, with shaggy hair and clouded mien, appeared. He was a colleague of Reb Mosze, a teacher from a little town where he enlightened the Israelitish youths. He stood in the middle of the room, holding a heavy book with both hands. After greeting the master, he began in these words,—

"Rabbi! my soul has been in trouble. Two days ago, my children read that evening prayers ought to be said until the end of the first watch. The children asked me: 'What is the first watch?' I remained mute, for I did not know how to answer, and I came to you, rabbi, for a ray of wisdom to enlighten my mind. Tell me, oh rabbi, what are the watches according to which every Israelite has to regulate his prayers. Where are they? so that I may give an answer to the children."

The round-backed man stopped, and all eyes rested with excited curiosity upon the sage, who without changing his position, answered,—

"What should it be, but the angel's watch? And where do they watch? They watch before the throne of the Eternal, when the day declines and the night approaches. The angels are divided in three choirs. The first choir stands before the throne and keeps watch till midnight. Then is the time to say evening prayers. The second comes at midnight and keeps watch until dawn; when you see the sky turn rosy-red and pale-blue, the third choir arrives, and then it is time to say morning prayers."

The Master stopped, and a low murmur of admiration and rapture was heard amongst the crowd. But the melamed did not retire yet, his eyes fixed upon his book he began anew,—

"Rabbi, give me another ray of wisdom to carry back to my scholars. Near our little town lies the estate of a great lord. Sometimes the children go there and hear all sorts of things. Once coming thence, they told in town that the origin of thunder had been explained to them. They were told that thunder comes from heaven when two clouds meet and give out a force, they called electricity. I never heard of it before,—is it true that there exists such a force and that it originates thunder?"

During Reb Gerson's speech the Rabbi's face twitched with suppressed impatience and he smiled scornfully.

"It is not true!" he exclaimed, "there is no such force, and not from there comes thunder. When the Roman emperor destroyed the Temple, and dispersed the people of

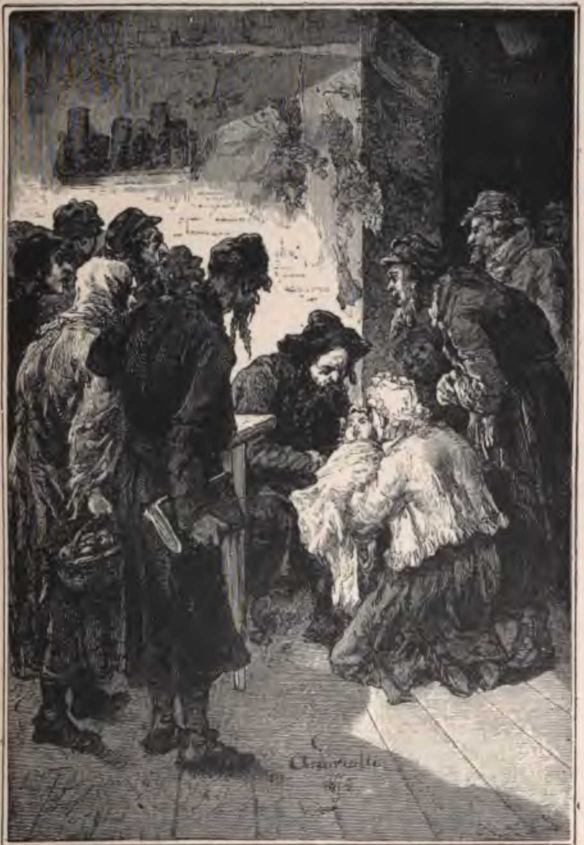
Israel, there was thunder. Where did it come from? It came from Jehovah's breast who wept aloud over the destruction of his people. And now the Lord weeps over his people, and his moans are heard upon earth as thunder; his tears fall into the seas, and make them heave and rise, and shake the earth into its foundations, and send forth smoke and fire. I have told you now whence comes thunder and earthquakes. Go in peace and repeat to your children what I told you."

With a humble bow and thanks, the melamed retired into the crowd. At the same time, beyond the door the loud wail of a child became audible.

Reb Mosze called out,—

"Chaim, dairy farmer from Kamionka and his wife Malka."

From the crowd came a man and a woman. Both looked pale and troubled; the woman carried a sick child on her arms. They knelt before him and holding up to him the child, wasted with disease, asked for his help and advice. Todros bent tenderly over the fragile little body and looked long and attentively at it. Reb Mosze squatting on the floor, looked at the master for orders mixing and stirring the decoctions. In this way, one by one, came the people to their teacher, sage, physician, prophet almost, plied him with questions, and asked for advice. A troubled husband brought his comely, buxom wife, and asked for a judgment by help of a certain water, called the water of jealousy. If the wife be guilty of infidelity, the efficacy of the water is believed to cause death, if innocent it will enhance her beauty and give her health. Another man



' Todros bent tenderly over the fragile little body and looked long and attentively at it.—Page 222.

asked what he was to do if the time for prayers arrived during a journey and he could not turn his face to the east, because the storm and dust would blind his eyes. A great many came crying and bewailing their miserable lives, and asked the sage to look into the future and tell them how long it would be till the Messiah arrived. The greater part of the people did not want anything, asked neither questions nor came for advice ; they simply wanted to see the revered Master, breathe the same air with him, and fill their souls with the words that dropped from his lips, and see the light of his countenance.

It was evident that Isaac Todros felt and appreciated his high position. He attended to all their wants with the greatest gravity, zeal and patience. He explained and put the people right in points of the law, inflicted penances upon sinners gave physic to the sick, advice to the ignorant without changing his position, only fixing his either stern or thoughtful eyes upon those that came to him. Several times when the people wailed and complained, entreating him to foretell the coming of the Messiah, his dark eyes grew misty. He loved those that came to him with their troubles and felt for them. Big beads of perspiration stood upon his forehead, and his breath came hard and fast, but he still went on with his ministrations in the deep conviction that he was doing his duty, with a fervent faith and belief in all that he was doing and teaching, and the disinterestedness of a man who does not want anything for himself, except the little black hut, a scanty meal, and the tattered garments he had worn for many years.

Through the court of the synagogue in the meanwhile a man passed swiftly looking around him as if in search for something or somebody. It was Ber, Saul's son-in-law. He looked at the people crowding round the Rabbi's dwelling, at last his eyes lighted upon Meir, and he grasped him by the sleeve of his coat.

The young man woke up as from a trance, and looked absently round at his uncle.

"Come with me," whispered Ber.

"I cannot go away," said Meir, in an equally low voice, "I have important business with the rabbi and shall wait till all the people have left so that I may speak with him."

"Come away," repeated Ber, and took the youth by the shoulder.

Meir shook him off impatiently but Ber repeated,—

"Come with me now, you can return later when the people have gone, that is, if you wish it, but I do not think you will."

Both left the crowded hut. Ber walked swiftly and silently, leading his companion to a quiet part of the precincts where under the shadow of the walls of Bet-ha-Midrash, nobody could overhear their conversation.

Meir leaned against the wall. Ber stood silently before him, looking intently at his young kinsman.

Ber's outward appearance did not present any striking features; many would pass him without taking particular notice, yet the student of human nature would find in him a character worth knowing. He was forty years old, always carefully dressed, yet according to old customs. His delicately moulded features and blue eyes had a dreamy and apathetic expression which only lighted up under the excitement of business speculations. A deep yearning after something, and carefully suppressed dreams and stifled aspirations, gave to his mouth an expression of calm resignation. Sometimes, when the ghost of the past appeared before him, two deep furrows appeared across his forehead. It was evident that some fierce conflicts had been raging under that quiet exterior, and left wounds and scars which now and then would remind him painfully of the past.

He stood now opposite the young man whom, almost by force, he had dragged away from the crowd.

"Meir," he said at last, "an hour ago your grandfather had a long talk with his son, Abram. He left his visitors on purpose to speak with him and bade me to be present at their conversation. Rest in peace, Meir, your uncle will have no hand in the vile deed which will be perpetrated."

"Will be perpetrated?" interrupted Meir, passionately, "not if I can prevent it."

Ber smiled bitterly.

"How can you prevent it? I guessed you wanted to speak about it to the rabbi and I went after you, to warn and save you from the consequences of such a step. You thought that if you put the case before him he would rise in anger and forbid any one to do such an infamous deed. If he did that they would obey him, but he will not do it."

"Why should he not?" exclaimed Meir.

"Because he does not understand anything about it. If you questioned him about clean or unclean food, whether it were allowed to snuff the candle on a Sabbath, or gird the loins with pocket handkerchiefs, he would answer readily enough. He would tell you whether to bless first the wine or first the bread, or how the spirits transmigrate from one body to another, how many Sephiroth emanate from Jehovah and how to transpose the sacred letters in order to discover fresh mysteries, or about the arrival of the Messiah. But if you began to speak to him about distilleries, taxes, estates, and things in connection with them, he would open his eyes widely, and he would listen to you like a man struck by deafness, because these things are to him like a sealed letter. For him, beyond his sacred books, the world is like a great wilderness."

Meir bent his head.

"I feel the truth of what you say; yet if I asked him whether it be right for the sake of gain to wrong an innocent man?"

Ber answered,—

"He would ask you whether the innocent man were an Edomite or an Israelite."

Meir looked intently at the sky, thinking deeply, and evidently puzzled.

"Ber," he said at last, "do you hate the Edomites?"

The questioned man shook his head.

"Hatred is like poison to the human mind. Once, when I was young, I even thought of going to them and entreating them to help us. I am glad now that I did not do it and remained with my own people, but I have no ill-feeling towards them."

"And I have none," said Meir. "Do you think Kamionker hates them?"

"No," said Ber, decidedly. "He makes use of them; they are his milch cows. He may despise them, because they do not look after their business and allow themselves to be cheated."

"And Todros, does he hate them?" questioned Meir."

"Yes," said Ber, very emphatically. "Todros hates them. And why does he hate them? Because he does not live in the Present; he still lives in the Past, when the Roman emperor besieged Jerusalem and drove the Israelites out of Palestine. He breathes, thinks, and feels as if he had lived two thousand years ago. He does not know that from the time of his ancestor, Halevi Todros, other wise people have lived, and that times are changed, and that those that hated and persecuted us once, have since then stretched out their hands in peace and goodwill. How can he know anything? he never left Szybow since he was born, never read anything but the books left by his forefathers, has never seen or spoken to any one out of Israel."

Meir listened and nodded his head in sign that he agreed with his companion.

"I see there is no use at all in going to him," he said, thoughtfully.

"There is not," said Ber, "therefore, I went in search of you. He will not prevent Kamionker from wronging the lord of Kamionka, who represents to him the people of Ai; with whom Joshua went to war, or the Roman nation, who destroyed the Temple, or the Spaniard, who, five hundred years ago, burned and despoiled the Jews. He would not even listen to you and would denounce you as an infidel. If he has not brought his hand down upon you it is owing to the love and respect the people bear towards your grandfather, Saul. If you accused Kamionker before him, Kamionker would set him against you, as already does Reb Mosze. Meir ! be careful ! there are rocks ahead, save yourself before it is too late."

Meir did not reply to the warning.

"Ber," he said, "I am sure, that man, blind and revengeful as he is, possesses a great soul. Look how patiently he sits night and day over his books, how full of pity and compassion are his eyes when he listens to the poor people and comforts them, and does not want anything for himself. Ber ! his faith is so sincere !"

Ber smiled at his words and turned his dreamy eyes to heaven.

"You speak thus about the rabbi, Meir ; what do you say about the people who, in midst of misery, hunger, and humiliation, still thirst for wisdom and knowledge. Never mind whether it is the true wisdom or true knowledge, but look how they raise themselves above their narrow lives by their faith and reverence for their Wise Men. Do you think that this narrow, bigoted, greedy people have a great soul ?

Israel has a great soul, and I love it more than my life, my happiness, and my peace." He stopped for a minute, then grasped Ber by the shoulder. "I know what is wanting in Todros to make him a great man, and what is wanting in the Israelitish people to show their greatness to the world.—They ought to come out of the Past in which they persist to dwell, into the Present ; they want Sar-ha-

Olem, the angel of knowledge, to touch them with his wings."

Whilst the young man spoke thus, his face glowing with excitement, Ber looked at him thoughtfully.

"When I look at you, Meir, and listen to you, I see myself as I was at your age. I felt the same anger, the same grief, and I wanted—"

He stopped and passed his hand over his brow marked with two deep lines, and his eyes looked far away, as if into the future.

Anybody seeing their animated faces and lively gesticulation, as they stood near the wall of the Bet-ha-Midrash, would have concluded that they were discussing bargains. What else did people like them live or care for? Yet they think and suffer, but nobody guesses it or wishes to penetrate the mystery of their thoughts. It is like the depth of an unfathomable sea, its depths unknown even to those who are perishing in it.

"Come home with me," said Ber, "your grandfather will soon be sitting down to dinner with his guests, and be displeased at not seeing you at the table. There is already a storm brewing for you, because Mistress Hana has returned the betrothal gifts, broken off the engagement, and given Saul a piece of her mind in presence of all the visitors."

Meir carelessly waved his hands.

"I wished for it," he said, "I shall ask my grandfather's pardon; I can only think about one thing now, where to go to next?"

Ber looked wonderingly at the speaker.

" How obstinate you are," he remarked.

They were near the entrance gate when Ber suddenly stopped.

"Meir! whatever you do, don't go to the government authorities."

Meir passed his hand over his forehead.

"I thought of that," he said, "but I am afraid. If I reveal the whole truth, they will not only punish Kamionker, but also those poor wretches he tempted with his money. Poor people, ignorant people, I am sorry for them—"

He suddenly paused and looked fixedly in one direction, An elegant carriage drawn by four horses, crossed the market square. Meir pointed at the carriage, which stopped before Jankiel Kamionker's inn, and his eyes opened wider from a sudden idea which took hold of his mind.

"Ber!" he exclaimed, "do you see him? That is the lord of Kamionker."

CHAPTER VII.

THE sun declined towards the west, when in the porch of Saul's house stood a group of men gayly conversing amongst themselves. They were Saul's visitors, who, after having feasted at his hospitable board, were now saying good-bye and pressing the old man's hand, thanked him for his kind reception ; then by twos and threes mounted upon the waiting carts, their faces still turned toward their venerable host who stood in the porch.

In the sitting-room, the women, with the help of the servants, were busy with clearing the table and putting away the dinner service.

The fair was also drawing to an end ; the carts grew fewer by degrees, so did the people upon the square. All the noise and liveliness concentrated itself now in the several inns where the people were drinking and dancing. Jankiel Kamionker's inn was by far the most frequented and noisiest. No wonder. The crafty dealer rented several distilleries and some seventy inns about the country and ruled over a small army of sub-tenants and innkeepers, of the Samson kind, who bought meat once a week and starved on other days. They depended entirely upon Kamionker, who, if he did not treat them generously, they, on their side were not generous towards the peasants, *whom they plied with* drink. Through his subordinates, Kamionker held under his thumb thousands of peasants' families. Therefore they all came to his inn. He did not look himself after his humble customers but left it to his wife and his two strong and ugly daughters, who carried bottles and glasses round the tables, together with salted herrings and different kinds of bread. Nobody could have guessed seeing the faded woman, shabbily dressed, moving in that stifling atmosphere of alcohol and human breath, that she was the wife of one of the wealthiest men in the country.

Neither did the man in his musty garments who stood humbly at the door of the guests' room, look like a great capitalist and financier.

He stood near the threshold and his guest, the lord of Kamionka, reclined in the easy-chair smoking a cigar. The young gentleman was tall and handsome; his dark hair fell upon a white forehead, though the other part of his face was slightly browned by the sun. He had a good-natured and thoughtful face.

The gay playfulness with which his eyes twinkled was evidently caused by the sight of the nimble Jew whose body seemed to be made of india-rubber and the two corkscrew curls behind his ears of a fiery red seemed to dance to and fro with his every motion. Then he became thoughtful again because the red-haired Jew spoke about important business. The young nobleman did not know anything about the man himself with whom he dealt.

He was to him a Jew and the tenant of his distillery. That he might be also a prominent member of a powerfully organized body, a greatly respected and pious man, a mystic deeply versed in sacred knowledge, and finally a man who in those dirty freckled hands held the entangled threads of the fortunes of many Jewish and Christian families; of all this the lord of Kamionka knew nothing. Therefore it never occurred to him to invite the Jew to draw nearer or to sit down. Reb Jankiel likewise did not think of such a thing. He had been accustomed to stand humbly, as his fathers had done before him; nevertheless, his pale blue eyes were full of malice, whenever the young gentleman turned his look elsewhere and could not see him. Maybe Reb Jankiel did not realize his own feelings, yet he could not help seeing the contrast between his present humble attitude and the proud position he occupied in his own community. Such feelings, though ill defined, if united to a bad heart could produce no other results than hatred and even crime.

"You bore me, Jankiel, with your everlasting bargains and agreements," said the nobleman carelessly, twisting his cigar between his fingers. "I stopped at your inn for a few minutes to rest my horses, and you get me into business discussions at once."

Reb Jankiel bowed nimbly.

"I beg the Gracious Pan's pardon," he said smilingly, "but the distillery will be starting work next month, and I should like to renew the agreement."

"Of course you will be my tenant as you have been these last three years, but there is plenty of time."

"It is better to arrange everything beforehand. I shall have to buy a hundred head of cattle for fattening purposes, and I cannot afford the outlay unless I am sure of the tenancy. If the Gracious Pan permits, I shall come to.morrow to write the agreement."

The young nobleman rose.

"Very well—come to-morrow, but not in the morning, as I shall not be at home."

"The Gracious Pan thinks of spending the night in the neighborhood?" asked Jankiel, his face twitching nervously.

"Yes, in the near neighborhood," answered the nobleman, and was going to say something more, when the door behind Jankiel's back opened gently and a young Jew with a pale face and burning eyes entered boldly.

At the sight of the newcomer, Jankiel drew back instinctively, and an expression of terror came into his face.

"What do you want here?" he asked, in a choking voice.

The nobleman glanced carelessly at the young Jew.

"Do you want to speak with me, my friend?" he asked.

"Yes! with the Gracious Pan," said the newcomer, and went a few steps nearer; but Jankiel barred him the way.

"Do not permit him to come nearer, Gracious Pan, and do not speak with him; he is a bad man, and interferes with everybody."

The lord of Kamionka waved the frantic Jankiel aside.

"Let him speak, if he has any business with me; why should I not speak with him?"

Saying this he looked with evident curiosity at the *youthful* face of the intruder.

"The Gracious Pan does not know me," began the young man.

"And why should the Gracious Pan know such a good-for-nothing fellow," interrupted Jankiel, but the lord of Kamionka bade him be silent.

"I have seen you, Gracious Pan, at my grandfather's, Saul, whose son Rafael buys your corn."

"So you are Saul's grandson ?"

"Yes, Gracious Pan, I am his grandson."

"And the son of Rafael Ezofovitch ?"

"No, I am the son of Benjamin, the youngest of Saul's sons, who died long ago."

Meir did not speak Polish very fluently, yet he made himself understood. He had heard it spoken by those that came to deal with members of his family and had learned it of the Edomite who had also taught him to read and write.

"Did Rafael send you to me ?"

"No, I came on my own account."

He seemed to collect his thoughts, then boldly raised his head,—

"I came to warn you, Gracious Pan, bad people are preparing a great misfortune for you—"

Jankiel rushed forwards and with outspread arms placed himself between the two.

"Will you hold your tongue," he shouted, "why do you come here to disturb the Gracious Pan with your foolish talk ?" and turning towards the nobleman, he said,—

"He is a madman and a villain."

It was not the lord now who waved Jankiel aside but

Meir himself. With heightened color and breathing quickly, he pushed him aside and said,—

"He will not allow me to speak, but I will say quickly what I have to say. Do not trust him, Gracious Pan, he is a bad man and your enemy. He wants to do you a grievous harm—guard yourself and guard your house like the apple of your eye. I am not an informer, therefore, I came to say it in his presence and warn the Gracious Pan. He will revenge himself upon me, but that does not matter. I am doing my duty, as every true Israelite ought to do—for it is written 'the stranger that dwelleth with you shall be unto you as one born among you,' and it is further said, 'If thou remainest silent, upon thy head be the woes of Israel.'"

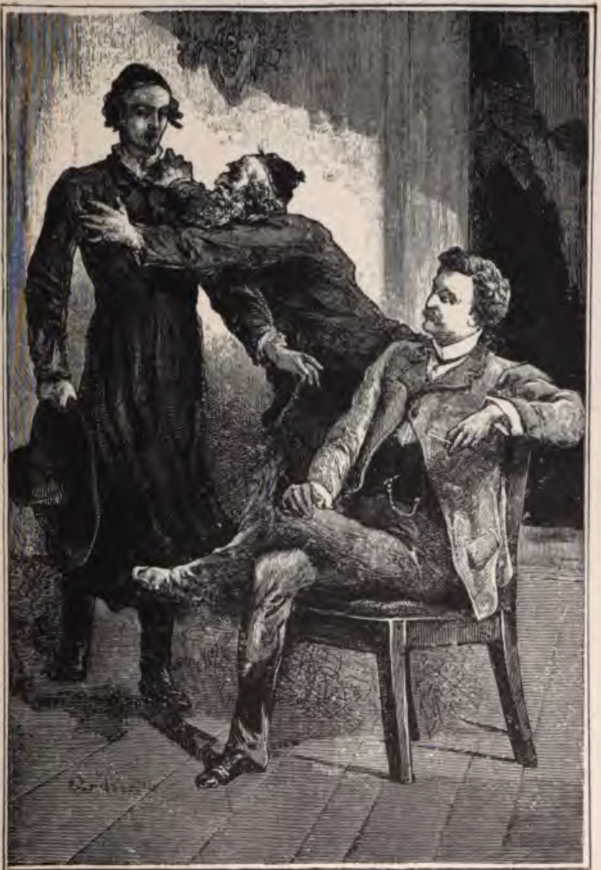
The young nobleman looked at the speaker with some interest, but his eyes twinkled. The quotation from Scripture, beautiful in itself, but marred by the faulty pronunciation made it appear more ridiculous than interesting.

"I perceive that old Saul has a grandson who is well grounded in the Scripture and has a prophetic gift; but tell clearly and distinctly, my young prophet, what misfortune is threatening me and why this honest Jankiel who has been dealing with me for years, has suddenly become my enemy?"

Jankiel stood close to the easy-chair and bending closer to the lord whispered smilingly,—

"He is mad; he always foretells all sorts of terrible things, and he hates me because I laugh at him."

"Oh! then I shall not laugh at him and make him hate



"Suddenly grasped him by the waist and dragging him toward the door."—Page 237.

me," said the nobleman gayly, and turning towards Meir, he asked,—

"Tell me what is the misfortune which threatens me; if you tell me the truth, you will be doing a good deed and I shall be grateful for it."

"You ask me a very difficult thing, Gracious Pan, I thought you would understand from a few words, it is hard for me to speak more clearly."

And he passed his hand over his brow which was moist with perspiration.

"Promise me, Gracious Pan, that if I speak out, my words will fall like a stone in the water. Promise me to make use of my information, but not to go with it to law."

The nobleman looked amused yet curious.

"I give you my word of honor that your secret will be safe with me."

Meir's burning eyes turned towards Jankiel, his whole frame shook, he opened his mouth, but the words refused to come. Jankiel seeing this emotion, which momentarily deprived him of his tongue suddenly grasped him by the waist and dragging toward the door shouted,—

"Why do you enter my house and disturb my honored guest by your foolish talk. The Gracious Pan is my guest, has known me for years, there, off with you at once."

Meir tried to get out of Jankiel's hands, and though he was taller and stronger, Jankiel was nimbler, and despair redoubled his energy. Struggling and panting both in a confused mass rolled towards the door, and the young gentleman looked at the struggle with an amused expression.

Meir's pale face towering above Jankiel's red head suddenly flushed.

"Do not laugh at me, Gracious Pan," he said brokenly, "You do not know how difficult it is for me to speak, but guard your house from fire!"

At these last words he disappeared through the door which the panting Jankiel slammed after him.

The lord of Kamionka still smiled. The struggle between the nimble red-haired Jankiel and the tall young Jew had looked very funny. During the battle the long coat-tails had flapped about like wings, and Jankiel in his desperate effort to get rid of the intruder had performed the most extraordinary acrobatic feats. It was a ridiculous scene altogether, the more ridiculous as the combatants belonged to a race at which to laugh was an old-time, honored custom. How could the young nobleman understand the deeper meaning of the play enacted before him?

He saw before him a young Jew who spoke in broken Polish, the grandson of a merchant, and who would be, in his turn, a merchant. That he was a noble spirit in rebellion against everything mean and dishonest, a despairing spirit longing for freedom and wider knowledge, that coming to him as he did, he had done a heroic act which would destroy his whole future, of all this the nobleman had not the slightest suspicion.

After a short pause he looked at Jankiel and asked,—

"Explain to me now, what did it all mean? What kind of a man is he really?"

"What kind of man?" said Jankiel, who seemingly had regained his composure. "It was a stupid affair, and I beg the Gracious Pan's pardon that it should have happened to him under my roof. He is a madman and very spiteful, he went mad from mere spitefulness."

"H'm!" said the young gentleman, "he did not look like a madman. He has a handsome face and an intelligent one."

"He is not altogether mad,—" began Jankiel, but the Pan interrupted him.

"He is the grandson of Saul Ezofovitch?" he asked, thoughtfully.

"He is Saul's grandson, but his grandfather does not like him."

"Whether he like him or not, I could scarcely ask his grandfather about him."

"On the contrary, ask him, Gracious Pan, what he thinks of his grandson," exclaimed Jankiel triumphantly. "Ask his uncles, I will go at once and bring his uncle Abram."

"No need," said the nobleman, shortly.

He rose and looked thoughtful; then, fixed his eyes upon Jankiel's face. Jankiel boldly met his searching glance.

"Listen, Jankiel," said the lord of Kamionka, "you are a man in years, a respectable merchant and father of a large family. I ought to trust you more than a young man I have seen to-day for the first time, and who may be wrong in the head for anything I know; but there must be something at the bottom of what he tells me. I must get some information about him."

"The Gracious Pan can get that information very easily," said Jankiel, shrugging his shoulders contemptuously.

The owner of Kamionka thought a little, and, then, asked,—

"Is that celebrated rabbi of yours in town?"

"Where should he be?" said Jankiel, "he has never been out of the town during all his life."

"A steady man, your rabbi," said the nobleman, reaching for his hat. "Now, Jankeil, show me the way, and if I do not hear anything new, I shall at last have seen and spoken with that celebrated man."

Jankiel opened the door for his distinguished guest, and followed him into the square, which was now almost deserted. Half way across, they met Eli Witebski, whom the lord of Kamionka greeted affably. By his manner and appearance the wealthy merchant came a little nearer to the civilized sphere in which the landowner moved himself.

"Has the Gracious Pan come to town on business?" asked Eli.

"No, I am only passing."

"And where might the Gracious Pan be going now?"

"To see your rabbi, Pan Witebski."

Witebski looked astonished.

"To see the rabbi? and what business can the noble Pan have with the rabbi?"

"It is a ridiculous story, Witebski. There, tell me do you know Saul Ezofovitch's grandson?"

"Which of them?" asked Eli, "Saul has many grandsons."

"What is his name?" asked the nobleman, turning his head half toward Jankiel.

"Meir, Meir, that worthless fellow!"

Witebski nodded his head as a sign he understood.

"Well," he said, with an indulgent smile, "I would not quite call him a worthless fellow. He is young and will mend; he is hot-headed, though."

"What! a little wrong here?" laughed the gentleman, pointing to his forehead.

"Well," said Eli, "he is not mad, but rash and impulsive, and just now he has done a very foolish thing and put me into a most awkward position.—Aï! aï! what trouble and vexation I had through him and shall have still.—"

"Oh! that's it!" said the lord, "he is a kind of half-witted mischief-maker, who does not know what he wants and gets into everybody's way?"

"The noble Pan has guessed it," said Eli, but added at once, "he is very young, and will be yet a decent man."

"Which means that he is not a decent man at present? I see."

"This way, please," said Jankiel, showing the gates of the synagogue court.

"And where does your rabbi live?"

Kamionka pointed to the little black hut close to the synagogue.

"What! in that little cottage?"

And he went towards it with Jankiel alone, as Witebski, guessing that some unpleasant business had brought them hither, directly took his leave, and bowing politely, left them.

The door of the hut was already closed, but a little group of worshippers still lingered at the open window. It was very silent within; but the rabbi did not rest, he never rested, as the few hours spent in broken sleep, could scarcely be called by that name.—He was bending over his books, which he knew by heart, but still pondered over [illegible], and of which to penetrate the mystery, he strove with his whole mind and soul.

Reb Mosze rested, but not altogether. He sat in the corner of the fireplace, his knees drawn up to his chin and his hands buried in his beard; he looked fixedly at the master, not unlike a fanatic savage worshipping his fetish, or as a scientist watches the universe.

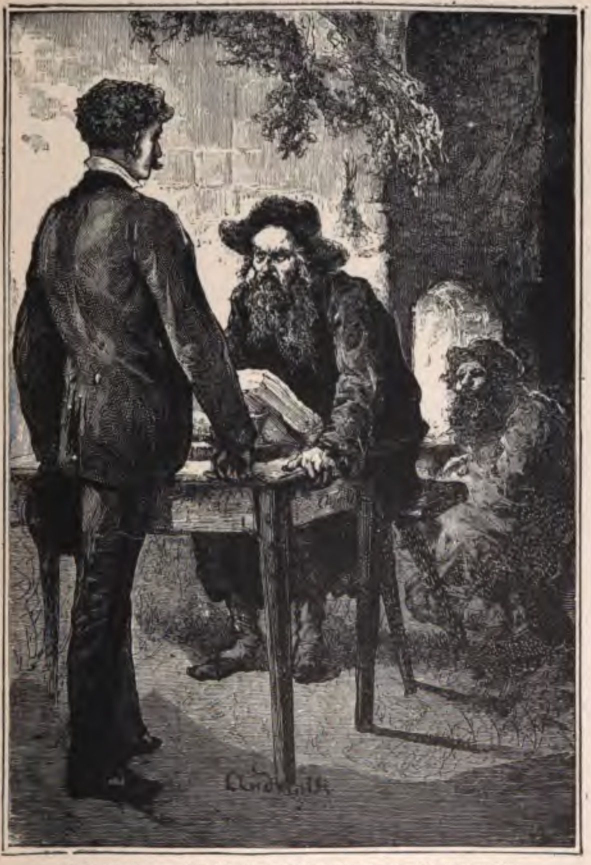
The eyes of Reb Mosze expressed deep veneration, wonder, and utter devotion.

Suddenly, the door opened, and upon the threshold stood the lord of Kamionka who, turning towards Jankiel, said,—

"Remain outside, I will speak alone with the rabbi."

Saying this, he stooped in order to enter into the low door, and then looked around.

Opposite him, near the wall, sat a man with a mass of coal-black hair slightly tinged with gray, about him a worn-out garment; and with a yellow-wrinkled face; who looked at the intruder with amazed and piercing eyes. In a far corner squatted another man only dimly visible; upon him the young gentleman bestowed only a passing glance. It did *not* even enter his mind that the man in the tattered



" Çould I speak with the Rabbi of Szybow."—Page 243.

clothes and piercing eyes could be the celebrated rabbi, whose fame spreading over the Jewish communities had sent a faint echo into the Christian world

He approached the man very politely.

"Could I see the Rabbi of Szybow for a few minutes?"

There was no answer.

The man sitting near the wall craned his long yellow neck, and opened his eyes and mouth wider. The sudden amazement, or perhaps other feelings gave him the appearance of stupidity almost idiotism. No wonder that Isaac Todros looked like one turned to stone at the sight of the nobleman standing before him. He was the first Edomite who had ever crossed his threshold, the first he had ever seen close to; and the first time he had heard the sonorous language, which sounded strange and unintelligible to his ears. If the angel Matatron, the heavenly patron and defender of Israel; or even the foremost of the evil spirits had stood before him he would have been less appalled; with supernatural beings he was in constant though not direct communication. He studied them, their nature and their functions. But this tall, stately man in his abominable garment which reached barely to his knee with the white, effeminate forehead and unintelligible language. Who was he? What did he want? Was he a Philistine? a cruel Roman or perhaps a Spaniard, one of those that murdered the famous Abrabanel family and drove his ancestor Todros out of Spain?

The lord waited a few minutes and not getting an answer repeated the question.

"*Could I speak with* the Rabbi of Szybow?" At the sound of the somewhat raised voice the squatting figure in the corner moved and rose slowly. Reb Mosze with open mouth and stupidly staring eyes came into the light and in his hoarse voice uttered the monosyllable "Hah ?"

At the sight of the man dressed in such primitive and nowadays unseen simplicity the lord's face twitched all over with suppressed merriment.

"My good sir," he said, turning to the melamed, "is that man deaf and dumb ? I asked him twice whether I could see the Rabbi of Szybow and got no answer." Saying this he pointed at Todros, who craning his neck in the melamed's direction asked,—

"Wos sagd er ? Wos will er ?" (what does he say ? what does he want), Reb Mosze instead of answering, opened his mouth still wider, at the same time murmurs and whispers became audible from the open window and the young gentleman looking into their direction saw a cluster of faces peeping into the room. The faces looked inquisitive and a little frightened, he turned towards them and asked :

"Does the Rabbi of Szybow live here ?"

"He does," said some voices.

"Where is he then ?"

A great many fingers pointed at the bench near the wall.

"What ? that man is your wise and celebrated rabbi ?"

The faces framed in the open window radiated with a peculiar blissfulness and nodded.

The young man made an heroic effort to control his *risible* muscles and with twinkling eyes he pointed at the *melamed*.

"And who is that ?"

"He is the melamed," said several voices, "a very wise and pious man."

The nobleman turned again towards Todros.

"Reverend sir," he said, "could I speak alone with you for a few minutes ?"

Todros remained silent as the grave, but his breath went faster and his eyes grew fiercer.

"Pan Melamed," said the nobleman to the barefooted man in the long coarse shirt—"perhaps this is a day when your rabbi is not allowed to speak ?"

"Hah ?" asked drawlingly Reb Mosze.

The nobleman half amused, half angry, turned towards the people.

"Why do they not answer ?"

There was a momentary silence. The faces looked perplexedly at each other.

One of them at last said : "They only understand the Jewish language."

The owner of Kamionka looked at them in open-eyed amazement, he could scarcely believe he had heard aright.

"What ? you don't mean to say they do not understand the language of the country they live in ?"

"Well, they do not understand it."

There was some indefined resentment in the voice which said that.

At this moment, Isaac Todros drew himself up and raising both arms above his head began to speak quickly.

"*And a day will arrive when the Messiah, who sleeps in Paradise, will wake* up and descend upon the earth.

Then a great war will spread over the world ; Israel will stand up against Edom and Ishmael, until Edom and Ishmael will fall at his feet like shattered cedars."

His gestures were at once solemn and threatening, his eyes blazing, and catching his breath, he repeated again.

"Edom and Ishmael will lie at the feet of Israel like broken cedars and the thunderbolt of the Lord will fall upon them and crush them into powder."

It was now the Edomite's turn to look astonished, for he did not understand a word. He looked not unlike a tall stately cedar as he stood there, but not like one that could be easily crushed into powder. His face was rippling over with laughter which he carefully tried to suppress.

"What does he say ?" he asked the people at the window. There was no answer. All eyes were riveted upon the sage and on the melamed's face there was an expression of ecstatic rapture.

"My good people, tell me what he said," repeated the nobleman. A deep voice, as if in sarcastic retribution answered with another question,—

"Did the Gracious Pan not understand ?"

This ingenuous question put an end to the young man's self-control and he burst out into a peal of laughter and turned towards the door.

"Savages !" he murmured to himself, and he laughed still when he crossed the precincts and the people who crowded round the rabbi's window looked after with astonished and deeply offended eyes. The young man *laughed,* tickled by the ludicrous aspect of the whole scene ; *yet under* his apparent merriment there was an under-current of resentment and anger, that the Wise Men of Israel should have shown themselves to him like savages, who did not even speak the language of the country whose air they breathed and that had nourished them for many centuries. The people round the rabbi's hut followed him with displeased looks almost amounting to hatred because he had blasphemed what they loved and revered beyond anything. Poor Sages of Israel with their worshippers! Poor Edomite laughing at the sage and his worshippers! but poorest of all, the country, the sons of which, after journeying together for so many centuries, do not understand each other's heart and language.

At the gate of the precincts, Jankiel Kamionker met the young nobleman,—

"Well Jankiel," he said, "you have indeed a wise and learned rabbi." Jankiel did not reply to this but began at once to speak about the agreement and the Kamionka distillery. He spoke glibly and easily and did not appear to remember what had occurred, or refer to it. Neither did the lord of Kamionka, upon whom the whole scene had left an impression of astonishment and amusement. The young prophet, and Jankiel with his red curls trying to evict him; the rabbi who only spoke the Jewish language, and his companion in the wonderful costume; it was as good as a play. How his friends would enjoy his description, how the good-natured Pan Andrew would laugh and his daughter the beautiful Hedwiga, of whom he thought night and day as the believer in his paradise, would smile.

Thinking of her he jumped into the carriage, and looking at the west, he exclaimed,—

"How long you have kept me!"

He nodded to Jankiel and called to the coachman,—

"Drive on."

The four grays and the light carriage carried him swiftly through the town till he disappeared in a cloud of golden dust. In the western sky the red clouds died gradually away, and the transparent dusk of an August evening enveloped the town and darkened the sitting-room in the Ezofovitch house. Loud and angry voices had reverberated in that commonly peaceful household. The shrillest and angriest amongst them was that of Reb Jankiel, who abused one after the other all the members of the family, who answered either angrily or quietly, according to their different characters. After that the accusing and threatening man, shaking with fury or perhaps terror, had rushed out of the house towards the rabbi's dwelling; and those who remained behind sat silently and motionless as if riveted to their chairs by their angry or perplexed feelings.

CHAPTER VIII.

SAUL sat on the sofa with his head sunk on his breast, his hands lying motionless upon his knees and sighed loudly and heavily. Around him on chairs sat Rafael, Abram, and Ber. The wives of Rafael and Ber, the much-respected and beloved women, entered quietly and sat down behind their husbands. In a corner of the room not noticed by anybody sat young Chaim, Abram's son and Meir's devoted friend.

It was Saul who interrupted the silence.

"Where is he gone to?" meaning Jankiel.

"He is gone to denounce him before the rabbi," said Abram.

"He will bring Meir before the ecclesiastical tribunal," said Rafael.

Saul rocked himself and moaned aloud,—

"Aī! aī! my poor head! Did I live to see a grandson of mine brought up to judgment like a thief or robber?"

"It is as informer he will appear before the judges," said Abram, swiftly and passionately.

"Something must be done with Meir, father. Think of it and tell us what to do with him. Things cannot remain as they are. He will ruin us and our sons and bring shame upon the whole family. Father! people used to say *that it was always* an Ezofovitch who tried to under-mine the faith of Israel. That the house of Todros and the house of Ezofovitch are like two rivers that run in opposite directions but meet now and then and struggle, to see which would be the stronger, and to push the other underground. This talk had subsided, people began to forget, till Meir stirred it up again. Something must be done. Think of it, father, and we will do as you command us."

Two red spots appeared on Saul's face.

"What is to be done with him?" he asked, in a voice that sounded like a smothered sob.

Rafael said,—

"He must be married as quickly as possible."

Ber, who had remained silent up to now, observed,—

"Why not send him into the world?"

Saul thought a long time and then replied,—

"Your advice is no good. I cannot punish him severely. What would my father Hersz say to it, in whose footsteps he wishes to go, and whom I am not at liberty to judge. I cannot marry him quickly because the child is not like other children,—He is proud and sensitive and does not brook any fetters. Besides he is so disgraced and openly rebuked already, that no wealthy or respectable Israelite will give him his daughter in marriage."

Again Saul's voice shook. He had lived to see his grandson, the most beloved of all his children, come down so low that no respectable family would receive him as son-in-law.

"I cannot send him away, either," he continued, "because I am afraid that in the world he will lose all that is left of his fathers' faith. I am in the position of the great and wise rabbi of whom it is written that he had a reckless son who ate chazar (pork) in secret. People advised him to send his son out into the world and expose him to misery and a wandering life. But he replied, 'Let my son remain at home. The sight of his father's troubled and sorrowful face may soften his heart and lead him to a better life; stern misery will change it into hard stone.'"

Saul became silent, all around were silent, nothing was heard but now and then a sigh from the women.

The room became darker and darker.

After a while, in a subdued, almost timid voice, Ber began: "Allow me to open my heart before you to-day. I speak but seldom, because as often as I want to speak the remembrance of my younger years seems to rise before me and smother my voice, therefore it is the voice least heard of all the voices in the family. I left off speaking or advising, and looked only after my business and my family. But I must speak now. Why trouble so much about Meir? Give him his liberty, let him go into the world, and do not punish him either by your anger or dooming him to poverty. What wrong has he done? He keeps all the commandments faithfully, has studied the holy books; all the members of our family, even the poor, ignorant people, love him like their own soul. What do you want from him? What has he done? Why should you punish him?"

Ber's speech, delivered in a lazy, half-timid voice, made a deep impression upon all those present. His wife Sara, *evidently frightened,* pulled him by the sleeve and whispered, "Hush, Ber! hush! they will be angry with you for your rash words."

Saul raised his head several times and bent it down again. One might have said that gratitude for Ber's defence of his grandson struggled with his rising anger.

"Ber, your own sins have spoken through your mouth. You stand up for Meir because you were once what he is now," said the passionate Abram.

Rafael, with his usual gravity, said,—

"You say, Ber, that he has not sinned against the ten commandments. That is true; but you forget that the covenant does not stand alone upon the ten commandments which Moses brought from Sinai, but also upon the six hundred and thirteen which the great Tanaites, Amoraits and Gaons, with other Wise Men, have put down in the Talmud. We owe not only obedience to the ten, but also to the six hundred and thirteen of the Talmud, and Meir has transgressed many of them."

"He has sinned greatly," called out Abram, "but the greatest and blackest sin he committed to-day, when he denounced a brother Israelite before the stranger, and thus broke the solidarity and faith of his people. What will become of us if we accuse each other before the stranger? Whom shall we love and shield, if not our brethren, who are bones of our bones and our blood. He felt more sorry for a stranger than for a brother Israelite, and for that he ought to——"

The violent and impulsive man broke off his sentence in the middle and remained open-mouthed, like one turned to stone.

He sat opposite the window, at which he stared now with stupefied eyes.

"What is that?" he called out in a trembling voice. "What is that?" he repeated in a frightened voice.

"What is that?" said everybody, and all except Saul rose from their seats.

The room, which had been quite dark, became suddenly lighted up, as if by the reflection of thousands of torches from without; not only the house of Ezofovitch, but the whole sky above was illuminated by a red glare.

The men and women stood spellbound in the middle of the room and looked silently at the fiery volumes, which rose higher and higher into the heavens above.

"How quickly he has done the deed," said Abram.

Nobody answered.

The little town, so quiet a moment before, became suddenly very noisy and tumultuous. No nation in the world is so easily carried away by sensations of any kind. This time the sensation was a powerful one. It was roused by the mighty element which carries destruction upon earth and lifts its blood-red banner up to the skies. The noise of thousands of running feet re-echoes in the streets like the rushing of many waters. The square was black with a dense crowd, which swiftly and noisily moved into one direction. Above the din of all the voices single words were heard now and then more distinctly.

"Kamionka! It is the Kamionka estate!" exclaimed those that knew the country.

"Hear! hear! it is Kamionka!" took up a chorus of voices.

"Aï! aï! such a fine place! such a magnificent place!"

Those were the last words which reached the inmates of Esofovitch's house. The crowd streamed on, and the voices sounded faint and far off.

Then Saul rose from the sofa, and, his face turned towards the window, he stood silent and motionless.

Then he raised his trembling hands and said, in a faltering voice: "In my father Hersz's time and in my own time such things did not happen, and sins like that were not in Israel. Our hands spread gold and silver over the land, but not fire and tears."

He paused a few moments gazing thoughtfully at the window. "My father Hersz, and his grandfather lived in friendship, they often conversed together about important affairs and the lord of Kamionka, he wore then a gold brocaded sash and a sword at his side, said to my father Hersz: Ezofvitch, you are a large-hearted man and a far-seeing man, if our side win, we will make a nobleman of you at the Diet— His son was not quite like his father, but he always spoke courteously to me, and I bought his corn for thirty years. Whenever he wanted money, I was always ready, because his estate brought much gain to me. The lady of Kamionka, she is still living, liked my mother Freida very much; she used to say: 'Mistress Freida has a great many diamonds and I have only one.' She called her son, her diamond, who was like the apple of her eye, the same son whose house is now in flames," and he pointed at the fiery columns, with a silent gesture of grief and horror.

Then Rafael spoke.

"When I was last time at Kamionka, the old lady was sitting with her son upon the balcony, and when I began to speak about business, she said to him :

"'Remember, Sigismond, never sell your corn to anybody but to an Ezofovitch ; they are amongst the Jews the most honest and most friendly toward us.' And after that she began asking whether old Freida were still alive, and her son Saul, and whether he had many grandchildren. Then she looked at her son and said to me. 'Pan Rafael, I have no grandsons !' And I bowed politely and said : 'May the Gracious Lady live a hundred years and see a great many grandsons of her own !'—I did not put a lie into her ear, I sincerely wished her well, why should I not wish her well ?" Rafael left off speaking, and Saul, turning towards him, asked,—

"Rafael, has he ever wronged you ?"

Rafael thought a little and then replied,—

"No. He has never done me the slightest wrong. He is a little proud, that is true, and does not look sharp after his business ; he is fond of amusements, and when an Israelite bows to him, he gives him a careless nod and does not try to make a friend of him . . . but his heart is good, and his word is his bond, and in business he is more likely to wrong himself than anybody else."

Sara who stood near her husband, wrung her hands and rocking her body sighed mournfully ;—

"Aï ! aï ! such a handsome gentleman to have such a misfortune happen to him."

"Such a fine young man, and he was going to marry such a *beautiful young* lady," said the wife of Rafael.

"And how will he be able to marry now, when he is ruined?" said Saul, and added in a lower voice: "A great sin has been committed in Israel!"

"A great shame has fallen to-day on Israel's head," said Rafael.

From a corner of the room where the glare penetrated least, came or rather crept forth Abram. Bent almost in two, and trembling in every limb he kissed his father's hand.

"Father," he said, "I thank you that you saved me from it."

Saul raised his head. The color came back to his face and energy gleamed in his eyes.

"Abram," he said, in a commanding tone, "have your horses ready at once and drive as quick as you can on to the estate where the young lord is staying. He cannot see the conflagration from there; drive quickly and tell him to come and save his property and his mother."

"You, Rafael, go at once to Jankiel's and Leisor's inns where the peasants are drinking. Tell them to drive home quickly to save their lord's property."

Obedient like little children, Saul's two sons left the room at once and the women went out into the porch. Then Ber came close to Saul.

"Father! what do you think now of Meir? Was he not right to warn the lord of Kamionka?"

Saul bent his head, but did not answer.

"Father," said Ber, "save Meir!" Go to the rabbi, and to the dahons, (judges) and elders, ask them not to bring him before their tribunal."

Saul did not answer for a long while.

“It is very difficult for me to go,” he said at last, “the hardest task to humble my gray head before Todros,” but, he added after a pause, “I will go to-morrow—we must stand up for the child—though he be rash and do not pay due reverence to the faith and customs of his father.”

CHAPTER IX.

WHILST the above took place in the house of Ezofovitch, the little meadow close to the town was covered by a waving, murmuring and compact mass of people. From this spot the terrible conflagration could be seen the most distinctly, therefore the whole population, eager and greedy for sensation, congregated there.

The reflected light of the fire rose above the pine forest, which was enveloped in a rosy light and so transparent that every branch and stem could be seen distinctly. The wide half-circle of the glare, dark red below, grew paler and paler above, till the golden yellow light lost itself in the pale blue sky. The stars twinkled with a feeble uncertain light, and on the opposite side, beyond the birchwood rose the red ball of the moon.

Amongst the population, sentences and words, quick and sharp, whizzed about like pistol shots. Somebody was telling that when Jankiel Kamionker heard about the fire he had gone off to the estate tearing his hair like a madman, wailing and lamenting over the loss of the spirits which he had there in such quantities. Hearing this, many people smiled knowingly, others shook their heads compassionately at the supposed heavy losses of Jankiel, but the greater part of the people kept silence, and not as much as mentioned Jankiel's name or his losses. They guessed the truth, here and there somebody knew about it; but nobody dared to meddle in a business so full of danger with an unwary word.

A full hour after the first gleam of the fire had been noticed, a light carriage and four gray horses were seen in full gallop across the streets in the direction of the meadow.

It was not the regular road to Kamionka, in fact, there was no road at all; but by driving across the meadow, the young owner shortened his way considerably. He did not sit in the carriage, but stood straight up, holding on by the box-seat, and kept his eyes fixed upon the red glare of the flames, where his mother was, and which were consuming the house of his fathers.

When the horses came upon the meadow and he saw the crowd, he shouted to the coachman,—

"Be careful; do not hurt the people."

"A good man," said one in the crowd, "at such a moment he still thinks of other people."

Some groaned aloud.

A few heads clustered together, whispering. The name of Jankiel was whispered low—very low.

But there was a spot, not on the meadow, but in the little street close to, where people talked aloud. Near Izmul's hut, upon the bench before the window, stood Meir. Thence he looked at the meadow, black with people, and at the red glare of the fire; around him in the street, stood a dozen or more of the young men, his friends. Their faces looked excited and indignant.

Chaim, the son of Abram, who an hour before had been an unseen witness to Saul's conversation with his sons, told his friends about it. Carried away by his indignation, he repeated in a loud voice every word that had passed, he emphasized every word and his friends re-echoed them. The young and usually timid spirits grew bolder under the pressure of shame and exasperation. Only one voice was missing amongst the chorus of young voices, the most prominent of all, because the leading spirit of the young people. Eliezer was not amongst those who crowded round Meir; but sat apart, leaning against the black wall of the hut. His elbows rested on his knees and his face was buried in his hands. He looked like one petrified in this position; full of grief and shame. From time to time he rocked his body slightly. The dreamy, timid spirit was overwhelmed with bitter and desperate thoughts.

Presently, from beyond the corner of the street, a black, thin shadow glided swiftly along the walls, and close by the group of young men, the heavy panting, almost moaning, of an exhausted human being, became audible. "Izmul!" said the young men.

"Hush!" said Meir in a low voice, jumping down from the bench. "Let nobody utter the name of the miserable man, so as not to bring him into danger. I have been standing here to watch for his return. Go away from here and remember that your eyes have not seen Izmul coming from that direction, not seen—"

"You are right," whispered Ariel, "he is our poor brother."

"Poor brother, poor, poor!" they repeated all round.

They dispersed at once. Near the hut remained only

Meir and Eliezer, whom nothing could rouse from his stupor.

Izmul ran into the hut, deserted by every one except the blind mother and the smallest children. There he threw himself at full length upon the floor and beat his forehead in the dust, sobbing and moaning he muttered in broken sentences,—

"I am not guilty, not guilty, not guilty. I did not fire it. I did not hold the vessel full of oil; he, Jochel did all that, I stood on watch in the fields—when I saw the fire—aï! aï! I understood what I had been doing—

"Hush!" said a low, sorrowful voice close to the despairing, almost senseless man. "Hold your tongue, Izmul, till I shut the door and window."

Izmul raised his face, but again dropped it on the dusty floor.

"Moreine," he moaned, "moreine, my daughters were growing up, it was necessary to marry them, I had no money to pay the taxes with for the whole year."

"Get up and calm yourself," said Meir.

Izmul did not listen. With his lips sweeping the dusty boards he kept on moaning.

"Moreine! save me. I am lost, body and soul."

"You have not lost your soul, Izmul. The Eternal will weigh your poverty against your sin; that is if you do not take the money with which bad people tempted you."

This time Izmul lifted his face from the floor. The lean and ashy pale face, covered with dust and twitching with nervous terror, presented a picture of the deepest human misery.

He looked at Meir with despairing eyes, and pointing at the miserable room, he groaned,—

"Moreine! how shall we be able to live without that money?"

Fully half an hour passed before Meir left the cottage, where the outcast Izmul accused himself, wailed, and moaned in a voice which gradually became lower till it almost sunk to a whisper. The ruddy glow from the street fell upon one corner of the dark entrance. There, coiled up between the goats, his head resting upon a projecting board, with the red light of the fire upon his face, slept Leibele. Neither noise nor the glare of the fire, not even the lamentations of his unhappy father, had disturbed his innocent sleep amongst his friends, the goats.

CHAPTER X.

NEXT morning an unusual stir prevailed amongst the inhabitants of the town. The common topic of all their conversation was the conflagration of the Kamionka estate. The whole house was reduced to ashes, nearly all the outbuildings had burned down, the barn and ricks with all the year's harvest had been devoured by the flames.

The old lady, the lord of Kamionka's mother, was very ill and had been carried into a neighbor's house.

To discuss these and other items of news, people stood in groups about the streets or before their houses; all the ordinary business of their everyday life seemed suspended for the time being.

Now and then amongst the groups a single question was heard repeatedly,—

"What will become of him?"

The question had nothing whatever to do with the ruined young nobleman, but meant Jankiel.

Some pitied the former sincerely, as also some blamed the latter; but the landowner was to them a perfect stranger, known to most of them only by sight. Jankiel Kamionker was connected with them by a thousand threads of common interest and friendship; besides that, he was surrounded with the halo of wealth and the reputation of ardent piety. No wonder that even those who blamed him *trembled for his safety.*

"Will they suspect him?" asked somebody here and there.

"Nobody would have dreamed of suspecting him, but for Meir Ezofovitch putting bad thoughts into their heads," was said here and there.

"He has broken the solidarity and covenant of Israel."

"What else could you expect? He is a Bofrim, a heretic!"

"He dared to raise his hand against Reb Mosze?"

"He lives in friendship with the Karaitish girl?"

Those that spoke cast ominous, threatening, glances into the direction of Ezofovitch's dwelling.

The house was unusually quiet and lifeless. The windows looking upon the square, which as a rule in summer time were open, so that anybody could see the daily life of people who had nothing to conceal, were shut to-day. Nobody had remembered to open them, or to straighten the sitting-room, as a rule kept in such perfect order. The women wandered aimlessly from one place to another, their caps were crushed and in disorder from their frequently putting their hands upon their heads; they stood before the kitchen fire and sighed distractedly. Sara's eyes were red; her husband Ber had two deep wrinkles on his forehead, a sure sign to her that he suffered grievously. He did not open his lips to her but sat with his head resting on his hand looking vacantly at his brothers-in-law. Rafael had his account books before him, but his thoughts were elsewhere as he raised his head frequently and looked at his brothers. Old Saul sat on the sofa, reading the sacred books, but, judging by his countenance, derived but little comfort from them.

Near the window in her deep easy-chair sat the great-grandmother dozing. Hers was the only face that did not show any change or lose any of its usual serenity. She opened now and then her eyes, then dozed off again. Soon after twelve o'clock the women busied themselves with arranging the table for dinner.

The door opened softly, Meir entered the room, and standing close to the wall, his eyes looked around at all the faces. It was a troubled look, almost timid and very sorrowful. Those present raised their eyes at him for a second only, but in the short instant a heavy load of mute reproaches fell upon the young man. It was the reproach of people used to a quiet, peaceful life, for past troubles and troubles still to come; there was some pity in it for the offender and also a threat of casting him off.

Only the great grandmother opened her eyes, when she saw him and with a smile murmured,—

"Kleiniskind?"

Meir's eyes rested tenderly and thoughtfully upon her face. At this moment there came a sudden dash and heavy thump. From amongst the groups that looked angrily at Ezofovitch's house somebody had thrown a heavy stone which, breaking the window, flew close over Frieda's head and fell into the middle of the room.

Saul's face became of a dull red, the women arranging the table screamed in terror, Rafael, Abram and Ber jumped up suddenly.

All stared at the broken window, but presently their attention became concentrated upon the great grandmother, Freida, who stood straight up and looked attentively at the stone in the middle of the room; then called out in her loud tuneless whisper,—

"It is the same stone! they threw it through the window the same, when Reb Nochim quarrelled with Hersz because he wanted to live in friendship with the strangers.—It is the same stone—at whom did they throw it now? All the wrinkles in her face quivered and her eyes, for the first time wide open, travelled about the room. "At whom did they throw it," she repeated.

"At me, dear bobe," replied from the opposite wall a voice full of unspoken grief.

"Meir!" exclaimed the great grandmother—not in her usual loud whisper, but in a loud almost piercing voice. Meir crossed the room, stood before her and took the little wrinkled hand caressingly in his own. He looked at her with eyes full of tenderness and as if in mute entreaty; she seemed to feel his look, for her eyelids flickered tremulously and restlessly. Saul rose from the sofa.

"Rafael," he said, "give me my cloak and hat?"

"Where are you going, father?" asked both sons, simultaneously.

"I am going to humble my head before the rabbi; to ask him to delay his judgment over my headstrong child until the anger in the hearts of the people has subsided."

Presently the gray-headed patriarch of the greatest family in the town, dressed in his long cloak and tall shiny hat, was seen crossing slowly and gravely the market square.

The groups standing about made way for him, bowing respectfully.

Somebody said loudly,—

“Poor Reb Saul to have such a grandson.”

The old man did not reply, but pressed his lips closer together.

More than an hour had elapsed when Saul returned from his errand.

He found all the elder members of the family in the same position as he had left them. Meir sat close to the easy-chair of the great-grandmother, who tightly clutched him by his coat sleeve.

Sara met her father and relieved him of his hat and cloak.

“What news do you bring, father?” asked Rafael.

Saul breathed heavily and looked gloomily at the floor.

“What could I bring from there?” he said after a momentary silence, “but shame and humiliation. The heart of Todros rejoices over the misfortune of the house of Ezofovitch. Smiles, like reptiles, are writhing and crawling over his yellow face.”

“And what did he say?” asked several voices.

“He said he had been far too forbearing towards my godless, insolent grandson — that Reb Mosze, Kamionker, and all the people were urging him to sit in judgment upon Meir—at my intercession he would put off the trial until to-morrow after sunset, and said if Meir humbled himself and asked his and the people's pardon, the sentence would be less severe.”

All eyes turned towards Meir.

"What do you say to it?" asked a chorus of voices.

Meir looked thoughtfully down.

"Give me time, till to-morrow," he pleaded. "I may perhaps find a way out of it."

"How can you find a way?" they exclaimed.

"Allow me not to answer you till to-morrow," repeated Meir.

They nodded and became silent. It was a mute consent.

In all of the hearts fear and anger were struggling with family pride. They felt angry with Meir, yet trembled for his fate, and the very thought that a member of their family should humble himself publicly before the rabbi and the people seemed almost unbearable.

"Who knows?" whispered Rafael, "he may find a way to avoid it."

"Perhaps his mother will appear to him in his sleep and tell him what to do," sighed Sara.

The belated dinner passed off in gloomy silence, interrupted only by the sighs of the women and a smothered sob from the children, who had been forbidden to laugh and chatter.

The grieved and mournful faces looked now and then at Freida, who showed an unusual restlessness. She did not speak, but neither did she doze during the meal, but moved uneasily in her chair, looked at Meir, then at the shattered window, and in the middle of the room on the spot where the stone had fallen down.

"What ails her?" asked the members of the family, of each other, in a perturbed voice.

"She is recalling something to her mind," others replied. "She is afraid of something. She wants to speak but cannot find the words."

When the dinner was over, two great-granddaughters wanted as usual to help Freida into the next room and lay her down to rest, but she planted her feet firmly on the ground and pointed to the easy-chair near the window. Presently the inmates of the room began gradually to disperse.

Rafael and Ber went driving away to a neighboring estate where they had some important business to transact. Abram shut himself up in his room to look after his accounts, or perhaps to read. Saul gave orders to his daughter to keep the house quiet, and sighing wearily, lay down upon his bed. The women after raking out the fire in the kitchen, shut the door of the sitting-room and betook themselves with their needlework into the courtyard, where they watched the children at play and conversed together in a low voice. The great-grandmother remained alone in the sitting-room.

Strange to say, though perfect silence reigned in the house, she did not fall asleep or even doze for one moment.

She sat in the easy-chair with her eyes wide open, and looking at the broken window, her lips kept moving continually as if she were speaking to herself. Sometimes she rocked her head, heavy with the voluminous turban, and the diamonds flashed out and glittered in the sudden motion, and the pendants jingled against the links of the golden chain. Her lips moved incessantly; presently also her hands moved quickly. It seemed as if she spoke with somebody, with the spirits of the Past, who came forth from the clouded memory. Suddenly she rocked her head and said aloud,—

"It was the same when my Hersz found the writing of the Senior—Bad people threw stones at him."

She stopped, great tears gathered in her eyes and ran slowly down the withered cheeks.

Meir rose from the bench where he had been sitting, crossed the room quickly, sat down on the low stool where the old woman rested her feet, and putting his folded hands upon her knee, asked,—

"Bobe! where is the writing of the Senior?"

At the sound of the voice which, as well as the face, reminded her of the man she had loved so well, and the days of her youth and happiness, she smiled. Her eyes full of tears did not look at the great-grandson, but somewhere far beyond, and she began to whisper,—

"The day he quarrelled with Reb Nochim and angered the people, he came home and sat down sorrowful upon the bench and called his wife, Freida. Freida was then young and beautiful; she wore a white turban and stood before the kitchen fire, looking after her servants; but when she heard her husband's voice she went in at once and stood before him, waiting for his words.

"'Freida!' he said 'where is the writing of the Senior.

'Then suddenly the whisper ceased. The young man sitting at her feet pressed his hands convulsively together and asked again,—

"Bobe! where is the writing of the Senior!"

The old woman gently swayed her head and the lips moved.

"He asked: 'Where is the writing of the Senior? Did the Senior bury it in the ground? No! he could not have buried it, as dampness and worms would have destroyed it. Did he hide it in the walls? No! he knew that fire might destroy the walls. Where did he hide it?' Thus asked Hersz, and his wife Freida pondered over his words and then pointed at the bookcase where the Senior's old books were preserved and said: 'Hersz, my Hersz! the writing is there.' When Freida said that, Hersz rejoiced and said: 'You, Freida, have a wise head, and your soul is as beautiful as your eyes.'" And smiling at the dim pictures of her youthful days, she whispered,—

"Then he said: 'a virtuous woman is far above rubies and her husband doth trust in her!"

The young man looked at her with entreating eyes and asked again,—

"Bobe! what did Hersz do with the writing?"

The old woman did not answer at once, but her lips moved silently as if she spoke with an invisible being and then took up the thread of her tale again.

"Hersz came back from a long journey, deeply grieved, and said to Freida: 'Everything is lost. We must hide the Senior's writing again; it is of no use now.' Freida asked: 'Hersz! where will you hide the writing.' Hersz replied: 'I will hide it where it was before, and you alone, Freida, will know the secret.'

Meir's *eyes sparkl*ed in sudden joy.

"Bobe! is the writing there?"

And he pointed at the old bookcase; but Freida did not answer, but continued to whisper,—

"He said: 'You alone will know the secret. And when the time is drawing near and your soul about to leave your body tell it to the son or grandson who resembles most your husband,—and which of my sons or grandsons is most like my husband Hersz? It is Meir, the son of Benjamin, who is like him as two grains of sand are like each other—he is my little child, the dearest of all. Freida will tell him the secret."

Meir held both the hands of his great grandmother in his own, and covered them with kisses.

"Bobe," he whispered, "Is the writing there?" pointing at the bookcase. But the old woman still followed the thread of her musings."

"Hersz said to Freida: 'If the elders of the family raise their hands against him and the people throw stones at him, you, Freida, tell him the secret. Let him take the writing of the Senior to his heart and leave everything, his house and wealth and family, and go forth into the world; for that writing is more precious than gold and pearls. It is the covenant of Israel with the Present, which flows like a great river over their heads and with the nations who tower around him like great mountains."

"Bobe! the elders of the family have risen up against me, the people have thrown stones at me—I am that dearest grandson of whom your husband Hersz spoke—tell me, is the writing amongst those old volumes?"

A broad almost triumphant smile lighted up the wrinkled face. She shook her head with a feeling of secret joy, and whispered,—

"Freida has watched over her husband's treasure and guarded it like her own soul. When she became a widow, Reb Nochim Todros came to her house and wanted to have the bookcase and its volumes put into the fire, then Reb Baruch Todros came and wanted to burn the books; but whenever they came, Freida screened the bookcase with her own body and said: 'This is my house and everything in it, is my own.' And when Freida stood before the bookcase, Freida's sons and grandsons stood before her and said: 'It is our mother, we will not let her be harmed. Reb Nochim was very angry and went away—Reb Isaac did not come, because he knew from his fathers that as long as Freida lives nobody touches the old bookcase—

"Freida has watched over her husband's treasure, it remains there and sleeps in peace."

With these last words the old woman pointed her thin hand at the bookcase, which stood not far from her, and a quiet laugh, a laugh of joy and almost childish triumph, shook her aged breast."

With one bound Meir reached the bookcase, and with a powerful hand shook the old, rusty lock. The door flew open and a cloud of dust burst forth which covered Meir's head as it had once, long ago, covered Hersz's golden hair and Freida's white turban. He did not heed it but plunged his hands amongst the books from which his ancestors had drawn their wisdom and where that lay hidden *which was to* direct him on his way.

At the sight of the open bookcase and the clouds of dust, Freida stretched forth her arms, and called out,—

"Hersz! Hersz! my own Hersz!"

It was not the usual tuneless whisper, but a loud cry wrung from the heart full of the joys and griefs of the Past. She had forgotten the great grandson, and thought the tall, golden-haired youth, covered with dust, was her husband, come back to her from unknown worlds.

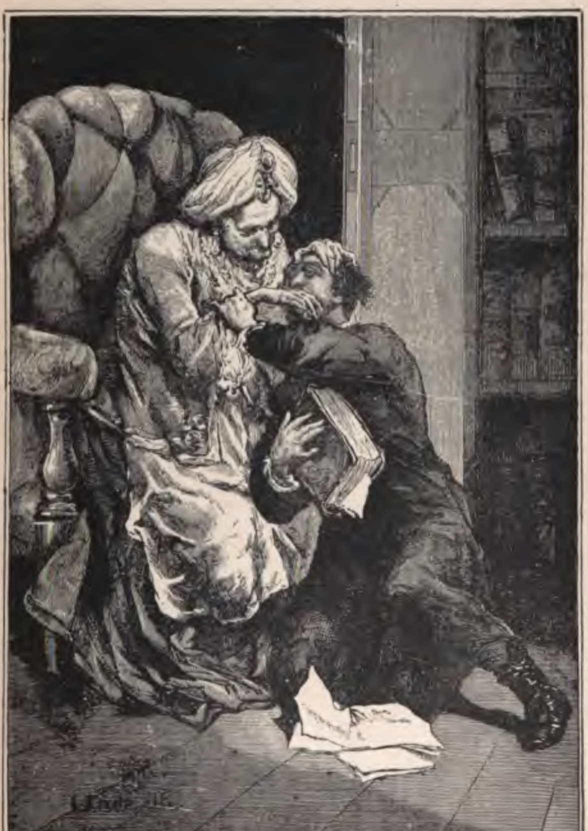
Meir turned his excited face and burning eyes to her.

"Bobe!" he said breathlessly. "Where is it? On the top? Below? in this book? that or that?"

"In that," said, the woman, pointing at the book upon which Meir's hand rested. Presently a roll of yellow papers rustled under the parchment cover of the volume. Holding them in his hands, Meir fell down before his great grandmother and kissed her hands and feet.

Freida smiled and touched his head gently, but by and by her eyelids drooped and the whole face took the expression of sweet dreaminess again. Tired with the strain upon her clouded memory, looking still into the bright dreamland of the past, the centenarian had fallen asleep, touched as it were by a gentle wave of the eternal sleep.

The passionate outpourings of thanks did not rouse her again. Meir hid the precious papers on his breast and went swiftly upstairs, towards the top of the house, where his young cousins dwelt.



"And kissed her hands and feet."—Page 274.

CHAPTER XI.

During the whole evening and the greater part of the night, the large window, near the pointed roof, flickered with an uncertain light and people were seen moving about constantly. At the early dawn some people came out of the house by a side door and went into different directions.

Soon afterwards, strange news began to circulate about the town. The news was undefined, vague, told and explained in different ways, but such as it was, excited the liveliest curiosity amongst the people. The everyday work seemed to go on as usual, but in midst of the dashing and rattling of implements of handiwork a continual hum of conversation was going on. Nobody could point out the source from which sprung all the rumors which excited the public mind, they seemed to be floating in the air and pervading all the streets and alleys.

"To-day after sunset, the elders of the Cahala and the judges, with Rabbi Isaac at their head, will sit in judgment upon Meir Ezofovitch."

"How will they judge him? What will they do to him?"

"No! there will be no judgment. The bold grandson of Rebe Saul will come to the Bet-ha-Midrash and confess his sins before the rabbi and the people and ask forgiveness!"

"No he will not humble himself, or ask forgiveness!"

"Why should he not?"

"Ah! ah! it is a great secret, but everybody knows about it, and everybody's eyes burn with curiosity.

"Young Meir has found a treasure!"

"What treasure? A treasure which has been buried for five hundred years, a thousand years, ever since the Jews came into this country, in the house of Ezofovitch.

"The treasure is the writing of one of their ancestors left as a legacy to his descendants."

"What does the writing say?"

"Nobody knows for certain."

All the inhabitants of the poorer streets had heard something about it from their fathers and grandfathers; but everybody had heard it different. Some said it was the writing of a wise and saintly Israelite, who lived long ago and who wanted to make his nation powerful and wise.

Others maintained that this same ancestor of Ezofovitch was an unbeliever, bribed by the stranger to destroy the name of Israel and the holy covenant from the face of the earth.

"The writing was to teach people how to make gold out of sand, and tells poor people how to get rich."

"No! it teaches how to drive away the evil spirits, so that they cannot touch you and how to transpose the letters of God's names, into a word, with which you can work miracles."

"The writing teaches how to make friends out of your enemies and to enter into a covenant of peace with all the nations. Somebody heard that it showed the way how to bring Moses back to life again and call on him to bring his people out of bondage into the land which flows with gold and wisdom."

"Why did they not search for that treasure sooner."

"They were afraid. It is said whoever touches that writing will be scorched with fire and burned into powder."

"Serpents will twist themselves around the heart of him."

"His forehead will became as black as soot."

"Happiness and peace will go from him forever!"

"Stones will fall upon him like hail!"

"His forehead will be branded with a red mark!"

Long, long ago, there still lived people who remembered it, the great merchant Hersz Ezofovitch, Saul's father, had touched that writing.

"And what became of him?"

"The old people said that when he touched those papers, serpents coiled round his heart and bit him, so that he died young."

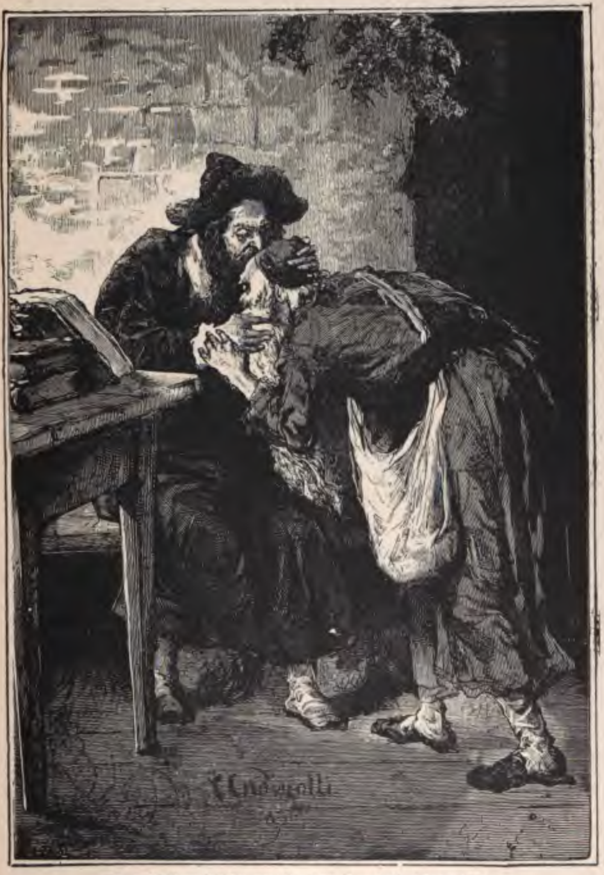
"And now young Meir has found that writing?"

"Yes, he found it and is going to read it before the people in Bet-ha-Midrash after sunset."

Going to and fro amongst the people who exchanged the above opinions was Reb Mosze, the melamed; he appeared first in one street, then in another; was seen in one court and near another's window, always listening intently; he smiled now and then and his eyes gleamed, but he said nothing. When directly appealed to by the people, and urged to give an opinion, he shook his head gloomily and muttered unintelligible sentences. He could not say anything, as he had not spoken to the master yet, to whom out of fanatical faith and mystic passionate attachment he had given himself up body and soul. Without definite orders from the revered sage, he dared not give an opinion or settle things even in his own mind. He might unwillingly act against the master's wish or transgress any of the thousands of precepts. Though he knew them all by heart yet he might fail to catch the deeper meaning without the guiding spirit. The melamed was fully conscious of his own wisdom, yet what did it mean in comparison with the rabbi's, whose mind pierced the very heavens. Jehovah looked upon him with pleased eyes, and wondered how he could have created such a perfect being as Rabbi Isaac Todros. About noon, when his mind and ears were full of what he had heard, he glided silently into the rabbi's hut. He could not get the rabbi's ear at once because the latter was conversing with an old man, whose dusty, travel-stained garments, showed that he had come from a great distance; he stood now leaning on his stick before the rabbi, looking at him with humble and at the same time radiant eyes. "I dearly wished," he said, in a voice trembling from old age and emotion, "to go to Jerusalem to die in the land of our fathers. But I am poor and I have no money for the journey. Give me, oh, rabbi, a handful of the sand which they bring to you from there every year, so that my grandchildren may scatter it upon my breast, when the soul is about to leave the body. With that handful of soil, I shall lie easier in my grave."

The rabbi took some white sand out of a carefully wrapped-up bag and gave it to the old man.

The man's whole face lighted up with joy, he carefully



"And kissed him on the forehead."—Page 279.

secured the precious relic under his ragged garments and then kissed the rabbi's hand with fervent gratitude.

"Rabbi," he said, "I have nothing to pay you with."

Todros craned his yellow neck towards him.

"You have come from a far country, indeed, if you do not know that Isaac Todros does not take any payment. If I do good to my brethren, I ask only for one reward, that the Almighty may increase by one drop, the wisdom I possess already, but of which I can never have enough."

The old man looked with admiring eyes at the sage, who, so full of wisdom, yet wished for more.

"Rabbi!" he sighed, "allow me to kiss your benevolent hand."

"Kiss it," said the master gently, and when the old man bent his head covered with white hair the rabbi put his arm round him and kissed him on the forehead.

"Rabbi!" exclaimed the old man with a burst of happiness in his voice, "you are good,— you are our father,— our master and brother."

"Blessings upon you," replied Todros, "for having preserved your faith unto your old age and the love for our fatherland, which makes you prize a handful of its soil more than gold and silver."

Both their eyes were full of tears. It was the first time they had ever met and yet their hearts were full of brotherly love and mutual sympathy.

Reb Mosze, who sat in his usual corner, waiting for the end of the interview, had also tears in his eyes. When Isaac Todros was alone he still waited a little and then said in a low voice,—

"Nasi!"

"Hah?" asked the sage, who was already buried in mystic speculation.

"There is great news about the town."

"What news?"

"Meir Ezofovitch has found the writing of his ancestor, the Senior, and is going to read it to-day before the assembled people."

The rabbi was fully awake now and craning his neck towards the melamed, exclaimed,—

"How did you come to hear of it?"

"Ah! the whole town is full of it. Meir's friends since early morning have been amongst the people spreading the news."

Todros did not say a word, but his eyes had a keen, almost savage expression.

"Nasi! will you allow him to do this?"

Todros was silent. At last he said in a determined voice,—

"I will."

Reb Mosze gave a convulsive start.

"Rabbi!" he exclaimed, "you are the wisest man that ever was, or will be on this earth,— but has your wisdom considered all the consequences, and that this writing may detach the people from you and the covenant?"

Todros looked sternly at the speaker,—

"You do not know the spirit of the people if you can think and speak like that. Have not I, and my fathers before me, tried to mould and educate the people and make them faithful to their religion? Let him read the papers—let the abomination come forth from its hiding-place, where it has lain till now, it will be easier to fight against it and crush it down, once and forever.—Let him read it—, the measure of his trangressions will then be full, and my avenging hand will come down upon him!"

A long silence followed upon these last words. The master was absorbed in thoughts, and the humble follower looked at him in silent adoration.

"Mosze!"

"What is your will, Nasi?"

"That writing must be taken from him and delivered into my hands."

"Nasi! how is it to be taken from him?"

"That writing must be taken and delivered into my hands!" repeated the rabbi decisively.

"Nasi! who is to take it from him?"

Todros fixed his glaring eyes upon his follower.

"That writing must be taken from him and delivered into my hands." he repeated for the third time.

Mosze bent his head.

"Rabbi!" he whispered, "I understand. Rest in peace. When he reads the abomination before the people such a a storm will break over his head that it will lay him in the dust."

Again both men were silent. The rabbi interrupted it:

"Mosze!"

"Yes, Nasi!"

"When is he going to read that blasphemous writing?"

"He is going to read it in the Bet-ha-Midrash after sunset."

"Mosze! go at once to the shamos (messenger) and tell him to convoke the elders and the judges into the Bet-ha-Cahol for a solemn judgment."

Mosze rose obediently and went towards the door.

The rabbi raising both arms, exclaimed:

"Woe to the headstrong and disobedient! Woe to him who touches the leper and spreads contagion!"

Saying this his whole face became suffused with a wave of dark, relentless hatred. And yet a quarter of an hour ago the same face was full of brotherly love; the same mouth spoke gentle and comforting words and the eyes were full of tears.

Thus gentleness and wrath, love and relentless hatred dwelt side by side in the same heart; virtues and dark crimes flow from the same source. Charity goes hand in hand with persecution and neighbor often stands for enemy. Man, who tended to human sufferings and healed the sick, with the same hand lit the stakes and prepared the instruments of torture.

What mysterious influences rule those dual lives, asks the perplexed student of human nature?

But for these mysterious undercurrents which lead human brains and hearts into awful error, Rabbi Isaac might have been a great man.

Let us be just. He would have been a great man but for those that raised the weapons of fire and sword and the still more deadly weapons of scorn and contempt against his brethren and thus confined them in a spiritual and moral Ghetto.

CHAPTER XII.

THE sun had set and the town was wrapped up in the dim light of a summer evening.

The large court of the synagogue swarmed with a dense crowd. The interior of Bet-ha-Midrash was already full of people. Heads close to heads, heads of old men, young men and children. They all moved and swayed ; necks were craned, beards raised, and eyes glowing in anticipation of some new sensation. The large room was lighted by a small lamp, suspended at the entrance door, and a single tallow candle in a brass candlestick which stood upon a white. table ; this with a single chair close to the high and bare wall, constituted the platform from which the speaker was wont to address the people :—In Israel, everybody, young or old and of whatever social position, has the right to speak in public, according to the democratic principles prevailing in the ancient Law. Every Israelite had the right to enter this building, whether for purposes of praying, reading or teaching.

The people who crowded outside the building looked often at the opposite Bet-ha-Cahol. Lights began to appear in the windows of the room where the elders and judges held their conferences. In .the entrance hall the lamp was being lit and burning candles placed upon the long table. Presently people well known to the inhabitants, ascended the steps of the portico. Singly or in twos arrived the judges of the community; all of them men well on in years, fathers of numerous families, wealthy merchants or house-owners. They ought to have been twelve in number, but the bystanders only counted up to eleven. The twelfth judge was Rafael Ezofovitch. People whispered to each other that the uncle of the accused could not sit in judgment against him; others said, he would not. After the judges, arrived the elders amongst whom, was Moreine Kalman with his hands in his pocket and the stereotyped honeyed smile on his lips, and Jankiel Kamionker whose face looked very yellow and whose eyes had the hunted look of a criminal. The last but not least of them was Isaac Todros who glided in so swiftly and silently, that scarcely anybody in the crowd noticed him.

At the same time from the depth of Bet-ha-Midrash a clear, resonant voice reached the ears of the surging crowd without.

"In the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, hear, oh Israel."

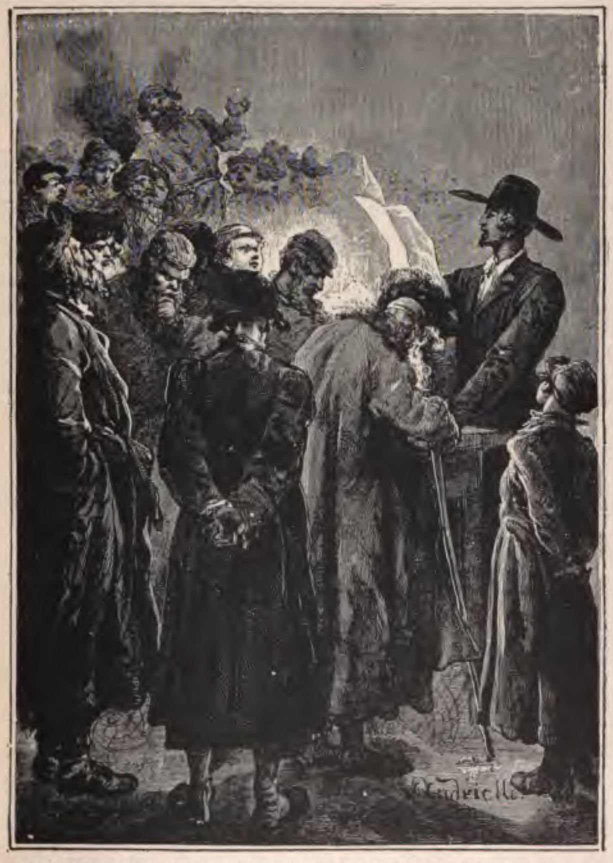
The murmur of the crowd within and without increased and almost rose to a tumult. For a few moments the voice of the speaker was drowned in the general hubbub and his few sentences sounded indistinct and broken.

Suddenly somebody from the crowd shouted,—

"Silence and listen, for it is said: Ye shall listen to whosoever speaketh in the name of Jehovah!"

"That is true," murmured voices, "he began in the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

Then everything became quiet except for the rustle of



"'Oh Israel!' he read out in a clear and thrilling voice, 'you are a great people!'"—Page 285.

those near the door who tried to get a better view of the speaker. They did not see anything unusual. Behind the white table, quiet and grave, stood Meir Ezofovitch. He was much paler than usual and his eyes burned feverishly; his emotion was not the outcome of fear or doubt but of a powerful conviction and radiant hope. In his hands he held a few sheets of old yellow paper which he raised now and then, to show whence he took his words.

"Oh Israel!" he read out, in a clear and thrilling voice, "you are a great people! You were the first amongst nations who recognized one God in heaven and heard on earth amidst the roar of thunder and flashes of lightning those ten great commandments which like ten rocks helped you and other nations to climb towards the sun of perfection.

"Oh Israel! blind from his birth or blinded by malice must be the man who fails to recognize the greatness of your mission.

"Dry from its birth or dried by the searching breath that comes from the nether world must be the eye that does not shed a tear at the sight of your sufferings.

"Ill-fated he, who looking at you calls you contemptible. May the Lord pity him and forgive him, as he possesses not the balance in which are weighed a nation's virtues and crimes, possesses not the wisdom which shows how pain and degradation produce sin.

"Israel! from you was born Moses, whose love was like the flaming bush. David with the golden harp; the beautiful Esther, weeping over the misery of her people. The Maccabees with their mighty swords came from amongst you and the prophets who died for their faith. Whilst living happily in the land of your fathers, you loathed to bind a brother into slavery; upon your fields you left the tenth sheaf for the poor and needy, and gave a hearing to anybody who spoke to the people; humbling yourself only before Jehovah, you said: We are all alike in the eyes of our Father. And when in after years, ill-fated, vanquished, covered with the blood of your sons, who defended the land of their fathers, you stood an outcast amongst nations and suffered from contempt and persecution, yet remained faithful unto your God and the memory of your fathers and taught other nations who suffered like you how to defend themselves without weapons. The Lord has made you intelligent, pure and charitable, oh my people; but it is nigh two thousand years since you did not possess the one necessary thing on earth—a fatherland."

Here the voice of the speaker gave way and he paused a minute. The crowd had caught his emotion, and a low tremor seemed to pass through the people, a few subdued voices murmured,—

"Listen! listen! It is the writing of a true Israelite who tells of the glory of his people."

They listened in silence, and Meir went on,—

"Woe to the people who have no fatherland! The soul of the people clings to the soil, as a child clings to the mother's breast which gives it nourishment, health, and relief from sickness. The Lord ordained it thus; but the people acted against his will, and tore your soul, oh Israel, from the soil to which it was attached. As an outcast you went and knocked for charity at the very doors of those who had despoiled you ; your head bent down under laws from which your mind recoiled ; your tongue tried to imitate their speech ; and the roof of your mouth dried up in exceeding bitterness ; your face darkened from wrath and humiliation, and you lived in fear lest your faith and the name of Israel should be obliterated from the face of the earth. Then under torments and awful sorrows your greatness fell from you, your sins and transgressions began to grow and multiply, and Jehovah, your Lord, looking down upon you said : ‘Is this my chosen people with whom I made the covenant of Truth and Grace ? Can he not keep it except with the words of his mouth which do not agree with the deeds of his hands ? Does he see the covenant only in his offerings, songs, prayers, and incense ; and forgets the high ladder I showed my servant Jacob in his dream, to teach people in all times how to reach me, who is Perfection and Understanding.’ ”

Here the voice of the reader became drowned again in a low, ever-increasing murmur.

“What is it he is reading ?” they asked each other. “It is the writing of a bad Israelite who throws ugly words at his people.

“Which are those sins that have been multiplying amongst us ? And how are we to praise the Lord if our songs and prayers have no value in His eyes ?”

Meir grew paler when he found his voice powerless against the increasing tumult. But he would not stop now and went on reading. By and by curiosity prevailed over discontent and they became silent once more.

They listened to the tale of Michael Senior’s life ; how by order of the king, and out of love for his people, he had stood at the head of their affairs, and wanted to lead them into new ways, at the end of which he saw the dawning of a happy future; how he had been thwarted in all his undertakings, and the heart of the people turned away from him.

"Great thoughts crowded in my brain which I could not utter because old friends and pupils abandoned me! In my breast there was fire, at which they would not warm themselves, and said it had been kindled by evil spirits. Then my body wasted away, the light of my eyes became dim, and the sleep of death drew near. I cried out in anguish 'Lord of the world! do not forsake thy messenger! Give him a voice powerful enough to reach the ears of those that are not born, since those that live will listen no longer.' And I opened the holy book and read,—

"'Though he be dead, he yet speaketh.'

"Son of my sons, you who have found this writing, read it to the people to let them know what I desired from them.

"The first thing I asked from them was: Forgetfulness.

"Did I want them to forget their Lord, Jehovah? or the name of Israel which produced the greatest men of the past? No, I could not ask them to forget it because the remembrance is dear to me and rejoices my heart.

"I asked my people to forget the wrongs and sorrows of the past. Do not remember injuries! do not say an eye for an eye! Mar Zutra every day, before he laid down to rest said: I forgive all those that have saddened me. Mar Zutra was a great man.

"When you begin to forget Israel, you will approach the flame which you speak of as alien, and which belongs to all nations. The alien flame from which you fly in your blind hatred has been kindled by Sar-ha-Olam, the angel of knowledge, who is the angel of angels and the prince of the world. The knowledge of religion is sacred, but other knowledge has equally been created by Him who dwells within perfect wisdom. Good is the apple of paradise, but are we therefore to refuse other products of the earth ? A time will come when the world will be full of knowledge as the sea is full of water.

"Thus spoke and wrote the sage whom your teachers hold accursed. His name was Moses Maimonides, a true prophet who did not look into the Past but in the Future, for he knew that a time would come when all those who did not gather around the flame of wisdom would fall into the dust, and their name become a byword of contempt and derision. He was the second Moses, he was my teacher from whom came all my joy and all my sorrow."

Here the reader dropped the hands which held the papers, and an expression of rapture shone in his face.

"He was my teacher from whom came all my joy and all my sorrow." Strange coincidence ! both, he and his ancestor who died three hundred years ago had listened to the same teacher. In the hearts of both he had kindled the heroic, self-sacrificing love, the greatest upon earth the love of the ideal. But the descendant who read these words which one by one dispersed all his doubts, felt no sorrow ; nothing but a great joy and hope.

A hoarse and thick voice shouted from the crowd,—

"Hear! hear! he praises alien flames! He calls the accursed heretic a second Moses!"

All heads turned towards the door to see who had spoken. It was Reb Mosze, who had climbed upon the bench near the door and was thus raised above the crowd; he shook his head, laughed derisively, and fixed his malignant eyes upon Meir. But the people's curiosity was not yet satisfied; under their ragged garments many hearts were beating with a new, and by themselves undefined, sensation.

"He speaks to us through the mouth of his descendant! Listen to him whose soul dwells already amongst the Sephiroth."

An old man with stooping back, who leaned upon his stick, raised his white head and said to Meir, plaintively,—

"How could Israel warm himself at the sun of knowledge when they were driven away from it by their enemies? And we had, Rebe, once famous physicians and wise men who were ministers at the court of kings,—but when they thrust us from the portals of knowledge we went forth and said: Henceforth Israel will hold aloof from the stranger, like an elder brother whom the younger brethren have offended."

Meir looked at the old man with a gentle half-triumphant smile.

"Rebe!" he replied, the voice of my ancestor will give an answer to your question:

"A time will come when wrong and injustice will disappear from earth. The gates of knowledge will be thrown open wide before you; enter quickly with a joyful heart, because understanding is the greatest weapon given by the Lord who rules the world by the eternal laws of wisdom.

"They do not wish to behold the works of the Creator; of such it is said: 'A fool has no delight in understanding.'

"The second thing I asked from my people is: Remembrance. Rava asked Raba the son of Moro, the origin of the proverb: 'Do not throw mud into the fountain from which thou drinkest.' Raba answered with the words of the Scriptures: 'Thou shalt not abhor an Egyptian because thou wast a stranger in his land.' Eliezer the son of Azarya said: 'The Egyptians did not invite the Israelites into their country out of self-interest, therefore the Lord rewarded them.' Since the country whose bread you eat did not treat you as cattle to plough his field, but as a tired brother to rest on his bosom, how have you rewarded it, Oh Israel?'

"It is not said thou shalt despoil the stranger, but 'One law shall be to him that is home-born and unto the stranger that sojourneth among you.'

"When I was holding the office bestowed upon me by the king, two base Israelites were found who had gone to the enemy's camp and betrayed the king's secrets and brought calamity and trouble upon the king's troops. What did I do with these base subjects? I ordered it to be published by the sounds of trumpets, all over the country, that these two, traitors to their God and their country, were forever expelled from the bosom of Israel. I did this, because when contemplating their deed my heart boiled over with wrath. I saw, as if in a dream the second Moses, who said:

'Thrust them out of Israel, for they have betrayed those that received them as guests into their land.'

"Not only for the good of your souls did I ask you for remembrance and gratitude, but also for your earthly welfare. When I sat in the great Synod assembled at the wish of the king and nobles, in the rich town of Lublin, I advised and urged the wise and honest men to send out a proclamation that would shake the hearts and brains of the people, even as the gardener shakes the trees to make the ripe fruit fall down.

"In this proclamation we said: 'Be useful to the country where you live and the inhabitants will respect you. This is the first step towards happiness, because contempt is bitter and respect sweet to the human heart.'

"But there are still other things which I have in my mind: Who is the servant of the soil, has bread in abundance. How is the soil to nourish you if you treat it, not as a faithful servant, but as a stranger who only cares for the present day.

"Rabbi Papa said: 'Do not engage in trade, but cultivate the soil; though both are good things; but the first is blessed by men.' If you come into the land plant all kinds of trees which produce fruit.

"There will come a time when wrongdoing disappears from the earth and the nations will call out to the sons of Israel: 'Take the plough into your hands and cultivate the land, that you and your sons may eat your bread in peace.' But the false prophets will raise their voice and tell you not to till the soil in the land of bondage.

"Oh my descendant who reads this, tell the people to beware of false prophets! Call out to them in a loud voice: The false prophets have brought you low, oh Israel!"

It was evident that the descendant fulfilled the command of his ancestor with conviction and unspeakable joy. Had he not himself felt the deep hatred towards the false sages? Why he considered them as such, he could not have told. His tongue was tied by want of knowledge and his spirit, longing for light, had beaten against the walls of darkness in midst of which he was imprisoned. Now he knew and understood; therefore, from the depth of his heart he called out,—

"Do not believe, oh Israel, in your false sages."

The crowd grew noisy.

"Of whom does he speak?"

"Who are the false sages and prophets in Israel?"

"He speaks of our rabbis and learned men; abominable blasphemy comes out of his mouth."

"He throws only blame upon the people of Israel!"

"He bids us to plough the soil in the land of bondage."

"Rabbi Nochim, the grandfather of Rabbi Isaac, said to our fathers: 'You shall not till the soil with your own hands in the land of bondage.'"

"Rabbi Nochim was the wisest of wise men, his wisdom lighted up the whole earth."

"Hersz Ezofovitch quarrelled fiercely with Reb Nochim."

"Hersz Ezofovitch was a great sinner!"

"Why, does he not tell us how to make poor people rich?"

"He said that we ought to become servants of the soil on which we live. When the Messiah comes and takes us to the promised land, we shall leave this one; why should we become its servants?"

"It was said the writing would teach us how to change sand into gold!"

"And how to drive out evil spirits."

"How to bring Moses to live again."

"They have told us lies. There is nothing wise or pleasing to the Lord in the writing."

Questions and mutterings followed swiftly one upon the other, accompanied by the scornful laughter of those that had been balked in their hopes and expectations. The melamed towering above the crowd, threw out insulting remarks or burst into a harsh laughter full of venomous malice. Under the second wall opposite the melamed stood Ber on a bench. These two men, standing opposite each other, presented a striking contrast. The melamed shook his head, and waved his arms, wildly shouting and laughing; Ber stood silent and motionless, his head thrown back, resting against the wall, and from the blue eyes that looked into the far, far distance, tears fell down in thick drops. Close to Meir in a compact body stood a dozen or more of young men, who looked with rapt attention at the reader. They breathed quickly, smiled now and then, and raised their arms and sighed. They seemed not to see or hear the crowd, their spirits longing for truth and blindly searching after it, had fastened upon the new thoughts. A thin quavering voice was heard from amongst the crowd. "They talked much about that, long, long ago; when I was young." A deep sigh accompanied the old man's words; perhaps he was one of Hersz' friends. Young boys who pushed their heads between the people laughed and shouted, then disappeared again.

The old yellow papers began to tremble in Meir's hands, upon his pale face appeared two red burning spots. He looked half angry, half entreatingly at the public.

"Be quiet!" he called out, "let me read to you the words of the great man to the end. He has chosen me as his messenger and I must obey his commands."

His voice was loud and authoritative. His whole frame seemed to expand under the influence of a new power.

"Be quiet," shouted the melamed, "let him read the abomination which hitherto has lain in hiding; let it come forth that we may stamp it out all the easier."

"Oh, Israel!" began the youthful voice once more. "Oh, Israel, the third thing I ask from you is discernment.

"In ages past, the learned men amongst us, were called Baale Tressim or armor-bearers. What was their armor? Their armor was the understanding of the covenant. Why were they armed? To protect Israel from annihilation. They said: Israel shall not disappear from the surface of the earth, for we will give him a stronghold from the covenant of Moses. Thus said the Tanaim. And the Sanhedrin where they sat, and the schools in which they taught became as the arsenal where they ground and prepared their weapons. Gamaliel, Eliezer, Joshua, Akiba, and Jehuda were amongst them like suns amongst the stars. Others followed in their footsteps, and through five hundred years they compiled, explained and wrote the great book which they named the Talmud, and which through centuries was a bulwark to the Israelites, shielding them from the devouring elements. From its pages the sons of Israel drew wisdom and comfort, and during the great dispersion, they never were divided because their thoughts and sighs went towards it and gathered round it, like children round their mother.

"This book, which during five hundred years was written and composed by wise and loving men, cannot be a foolish or a bad book. He who speaks thus of it, tell him to clean his heart from evil and then open it and read.

"But is everything which is good in itself, equally perfect?

"There are clouds in the sky and in the purest heart, the Lord discerns a flaw. Did Jehovah Himself write the books of our Law? Did the angels write them? No. People wrote them. Has there ever been a man during all the ages who does not know what it means to go astray? Is there any human work which is adequate for all times and all ages?

"The throne of the Pharaohs has been shattered, Niniveh fell in ruins, Rome which ruled over half the world broke asunder, and Greek wisdom has made way for other wisdom. The desert spreads now where once were rich and powerful cities, and cities are rising where formerly was a desert. Thus human works, the greatest of them, pass away, and others take their place.

"Israel! the nourishment which sustained your soul through many centuries contains grain, but also chaff. In your treasure hoards there are diamonds and worthless sand.

"The books of your Law are as the pomegranate which the foolish man ate with the rind which left a bitter taste in his mouth. When Rabbi Meir saw him doing this, he plucked the fruit from the tree, threw away the bitter rind and ate the luscious fruit. I wished to teach you as Rabbi Meir taught the man who ate the pomegranate. I wished for you the gift of discernment, for the books of your faith. Wished that you might use your intelligence as a sieve in order to separate the grain from the chaff, the diamonds from the sand ; so that you might keep the pure grain and the diamonds.

"You have thrust me off for this my request ; your hearts became hardened against me because of the fear and hatred towards things new. And yet it is written,—'Do not look at the vessel, but look at its contents.' There are new pitchers full of old wine, and old ones that are empty."

"Meir," whispered Ber, "look at the people," and added, in a still lower voice,—

"Get out from here as quick as you can."

Meir looked around at the seething, muttering crowd ; a smile, half angry, half sad, came on his lips.

"I did not expect this. I expected something quite different," he said in a low voice, and bent his head ; but he raised it almost instantly again, and called out,—

"I am the messenger of my ancestor. He has chosen me to read his thoughts to you. I must obey him."

He drew a deep breath and added in a still louder voice :

"He penetrated the doubts which were to arise in those that were not born and gave an answer to them. He penetrated into the inner life of the human soul, which thirsts after truth and knowledge, and offers you freedom and happiness through my mouth. I love him as if he had given me life. I bow down before the greatness of the man who has worked out his own immortality and dwells now in Jehovah's glory. I think as he thought, I wish for you what he wished. I am like him, I am the child of his spirit." His clear voice shook with emotion, and smiles and unshed tears were together on his mobile features.

"My ancestor says to you that all nations are moving on towards knowledge and happiness, but our heads are so full of little things that there is no room for great thoughts; that the study, they call Cabala, and which you consider; is a cursed science, because it kills the Israelite's intellect and leads him away from true science."

His voice became drowned in the general uproar, laughter and groaning, so that only broken sentences reached the small, attentive audience. Yet he did not cease speaking, but went on quicker and quicker with heaving breast. It almost seemed as if recognizing the futility of his efforts he tried to stand on his post as messenger of the dead as long as he could. Perhaps he had not lost hope altogether.

"Woe! woe!" called out voices in the crowd. "Heresy and sin have entered the house of Israel! Out of the mouths of children comes blasphemy against holy things."

"Listen, listen," called out Meir, "it is still far to the end of my ancestor's writing."

"Let us stop his mouth and drive him from the spot where only true Israelites ought to speak."

"Listen, it is written here, that Israel should leave off expecting a Messiah in the flesh."

"Woe! woe! he will take from the heart of Israel this only hope and comfort."

"Because he will not come upon earth in the shape of man, but in the shape of Time, bringing to all people knowledge, happiness, and peace."

"Meir, Meir, what are you doing? You will be lost, look at the people! go away whilst there is time," whispered those around him.

Ber stood at his side. Eliezer, Ariel, Chaim, and a few others surrounded him, but he neither saw nor heeded anything. Large beads of perspiration stood on the proudly raised brow, and his eyes looked despairingly and angrily at the tumultuous crowd.

Suddenly a dull thump was heard near the entrance door. The melamed had jumped down from the bench, and with his naked feet stamped several times upon the floor. Then in a few bounds he cleared the crowd, which made way for him, and with a violent jerk of his arm, threw down the brass candlestick with the yellow candle. At the same time somebody climbed on the bench and blew out the lamp near the door. Except for the pale streaks of moonlight, which came through the windows, the whole room was plunged in darkness, and amidst that darkness seethed and boiled the raging element, an exasperated populace.

Nobody could have singled out any individual expression. Words, curses, groans, came down like hailstones, and mixed together in a chaos indescribable. At last, from the wide open door of the Bet-ha-Midrash poured the dark stream of people which, outside in the court, was met by another of those who had not found room within, and were less noisy, though equally excited. A large wave of moonlight lit up the open space and the Bet-ha-Cahol, with its closed door and shuttered windows. On the portico steps, motionless and silent, his elbows resting on his knees, sat the shamos (messenger) awaiting orders from the interior of the building, which in midst of the uproarious mob stood dark and mute like the grave.

The crowd broke up in many groups. One of them, the largest, crossed the gates of the precincts, shouting and struggling, it poured into the moonlit square, where it looked like a monster bird flapping its huge wings. It was mostly composed of poorly dressed men, with long beards and maliciously gleaming eyes. Children of different ages flitted to and fro amongst them, picking up stones and mud. They all thronged towards one point, a single man surrounded by a bodyguard of friends. Pushed and knocked about, they resisted with their arms and shoulders until yielding to the pressure they finally gave way and were swallowed by the crowd. Then a shower of stones fell upon the back of the man, whom until now they had screened ; dozens of hands grasped his garments and tore them into strips, upon his bare head fell mud and handfuls of gravel picked out of the gutter. In his ears thundered the yells and groans of the infuriated mob, before his face flashed the clenched fists and inflamed faces of his assailants, and beyond, as if veiled in a blood-red mist, silent and closely shuttered, appeared the house of his fathers.

Towards that house, as if to a haven of salvation, he directed his steps as quick as the grasping hands and the children crowding round his feet, would let him. From his compressed lips came no sound, either of complaint or entreaty. He did not seem to feel the hands that smote him or the stones which pelted his body and which might maim or kill him any moment. With breast and shoulders he tried desperately to push aside the mob. It was not himself he defended; but the treasure he carried; now and then he touched his breast to make sure it was still there. Suddenly, a burly figure dressed in a coarse shirt and a thick stick in his hands, barred his way and shouted,—

"Fools! what are you doing! Why do you not take from him the loathsome writing? The Rabbi Isaac has ordered to tear the writing from him, he has hidden it on his breast!"

In an instant the young man, who had been assailed from the back and the sides only, found himself attacked in front.—Rough and dark hands reached at his breast, the convulsively clenched arms were wrenched asunder and they began to tear his garments. Then he raised his pale face towards the moonlit sky with a despairing cry.

"Jehovah!"

He felt a lithe and supple body creep up from under his feet and a pair of hot lips were pressed to the hand which hung down powerless. A wonderful contrast this single kiss of love in midst of all that hatred and fury. With a last, almost superhuman effort, he pushed off his assailants, stooped down and before anybody had time to rush at him again, lifted a child up in his arms. It threw its arms round his neck and looked with streaming eyes dilated with terror at the people.

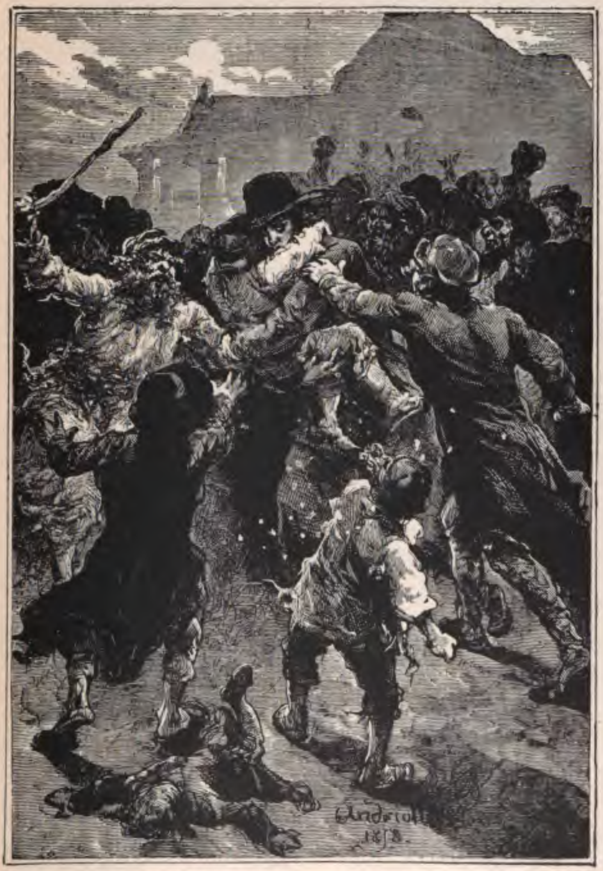
"It is my child! it is my Leibele! do not hurt him," called from the crowd the frightened voice of the tailor Izmul.

"Rebe!" called out several voices to the melamed, "he is shielding himself behind the child, the child loves him!"

"Take away the child and tear from him the writing!" yelled the melamed.

But nobody obeyed him. They still pulled at his clothes at the side and from behind, a few stones whizzed over his head, but he saw a clear space in front of him, and with a few bounds he reached the porch which an invisible hand quickly opened and as quickly bolted after he had entered.

Meir put the child down in the dark passage, and he himself entered the sitting-room, where by the light of the lamp he saw the whole family assembled. Panting and breathless he leaned against the wall and his dull eyes slowly looked around the room. Everybody was silent. Never since the house of Ezofovitch had existed in the world had a member of that family looked like the pale panting youth, whose head was covered with dust and mud, and whose garments hung in tatters around him. The forehead, moist with the dew of mortal anguish, was marked across with a red scar, caused by a rough stone, or perhaps some blunt instrument amidst the darkness of the Bet-ha-Midrash.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1878.

"And before anybody had time to rush at him again he lifted a child up."—Page 302.

But for the expression of pride and undaunted courage in his face, he might have been taken for a begging outcast, or a hunted criminal.

Saul covered his face with both hands. Some of the women sobbed aloud. Rafael, Abram, and other grave members of the family rose from their seats, stern and angry, and called out in one voice : "Ill-fated lad !" They were about to surround him, and to speak to him, when suddenly the shutters flew open with a crash, the windows shattered into bits, and heavy stones thundered against the furniture. From beyond the shattered windows, yells and shouts arose, over which dominated the hoarse voice of the melamed. They called for Meir to give up the writing, heaped abuse and insults upon the family, and threatened them with heaven's and the people's wrath.

The members of the family stood motionless, as if turned to stone from terror and shame.

Saul took his hands from his face, drew himself up proudly, and went quickly towards the door.

"Father ! where are you going ?" cried in terror the men and the women.

He pointed his shaking hand at the window, and said,—

"I will stand in the porch of my house and tell the foolish rabble to be quiet and take themselves off."

They barred his way. The women clung round his shoulders and knees.

"They will kill you, father !" they moaned.

Suddenly the raging tumult ceased. Instead of yells, a low murmur passed from mouth to mouth,—

"The shamos, the shamos, the shamos !"

It was indeed the same man who, silent and motionless, had sat on the steps of the Bet-ha-Cahol waiting for orders, and who now approached the house of Ezofovitch to proclaim the sentence of the tribunal before the family of the accused. The crowd, stirred by ardent curiosity to hear the sentence, pressed close to the windows, in which not a single pane of glass remained. Others scattered over the square and in the neighboring streets drew nearer and surrounded the house like a dark, living wall. The door of the house was opened and shut again, and the shamos entered the sitting-room.

He looked anxiously, almost suspiciously around, and bowed very low before Saul.

"Sholem Aleichem," (peace be with you) he said, in a low voice, as if he himself felt the bitter irony of the greeting.

"Rebe Saul!" he began, in a somewhat more assured voice, "do not be angry with your servant if he brings shame and misfortune into your house. I obey the command of the rabbi, the elders, and the judges, who sat in judgment upon your grandson, Meir, and whose sentence I am ordered to read out to him and you all!"

A deep silence followed upon his words. At last Saul, who stood leaning upon the shoulder of his son Rafael, said in a low voice,—

"Read."

The messenger unrolled the paper he was holding in his hand, and read,—

"Isaac Todros, the son of Baruch, Rabbi of Szybow, together with the judges and elders of the Cahala, who constituted the tribunal of the community of Szybow, heard the following accusations, confirmed by many witnesses, against Meir Ezofovitch, son of Benjamin,—

(1) "Meir Ezofovitch, son of Benjamin, is accused, and found guilty of the crime of breaking the Sabbath. Instead of giving himself up to the study of holy books, he watched and defended the dwelling of the heretic Abel Karaim and raised his hand in anger against Israelitish children.

(2) "That Meir Ezofovitch was seen reading the accursed book, 'More Nebuchim' by Moses Maimonides, the false sage, excommunicated by many saintly rabbis and learned men. Read this same book aloud to his companions, thus teaching them heresy and other abominations.

(3) "That Meir Ezofovitch held rebellious speeches against the covenant and the wise men of Israel, perverting thus their youthful minds.

(4) "That under pretext of charity and pity for the poor of the town, he gave them criminal and foolish advice; saying, they ought to see what the elders did with the money they received from them, and further they should distinguish in the covenant between God's work and people's invention, finally, told them to work in the fields like peasants."

(5) "That having hair growing on his face he refused to get married and broke his engagement with the Israelitish girl Mera, daughter of Eli, and showed thereby his resolution to avoid the married state.

(6) "That he lived in impure friendship with Golda, the granddaughter of a heretic, who not belonging to the

faithful, had been allowed to live in his place through the great charity of the rabbi and the elders. Meir the son of Benjamin has been seen in their dwelling, and meeting the girl Golda in lonely places, taking flowers from her, and joining his voice to hers in worldly songs on a Sabbath.

(7) "That he did not pay due respect to the learned men, and raised a sacrilegious hand against the melamed Reb Mosze, whom he knocked down, throwing the table upon him, causing thereby bodily harm to the melamed and great scandal in the community.

(8) "That in his great unheard-of malice, he denounced a brother Israelite, Reb Jankiel Kamionker, before an alien, thereby breaking the solidarity of his people, and bringing Reb Jankiel into trouble and perhaps danger.

(9) "That in his boundless audacity he extracted the writing of his ancestor, Michael Senior, from its hiding-place, where it ought to have rotted away, and with criminal insolence read it to a large crowd of people, thereby endangering the old Law and customs of the Israelites : and as the writing we have been told contains blasphemous and pernicious doctrines we consider the reading of the said document as the greatest of all his crimes ; therefore, according to the power given us by our Law over the sons of Israel, we decree,—

"That to-morrow after sunset a great and terrible curse will be pronounced against the audacious and disobedient Meir Ezofovitch, son of Benjamin, through the mouth of Rabbi Isaac, son of Baruch, for the hearing of which all the Israelites of Szybow and the environs will be summoned by the messenger, and Meir Ezofovitch will be thrust out and ignominiously expelled from the bosom of Israel. All of you who remain faithful unto the Lord and the covenant live in peace and happiness with all your brethren in Israel."

The shamos had finished, and putting the paper under his coat bowed low, and swiftly left the room.

For several minutes a deadly silence prevailed within and without.

Suddenly Meir, who had stood like one entranced, threw his arms wildly above his head and uttered a heart-broken cry,—

"Expelled from Israel! cursed and expelled by my own people!" His voice died away in a loud sob. With his head pressed against the wall he sobbed in great anguish. It was enough to hear one of these sobs which shook his whole frame, to guess that he had been wounded in the most vital part of his soul.

Then approached his uncles, their wives and daughters, with voices of entreaty, anger, threats and prayers beseeching him to give up the writing of the Senior, to let it be burned publicly, and perhaps the decree of the elders would be mitigated. The men crowded round him, the women kissed him.

Still shaken by sobs, and his face closely pressed to the wall, deaf to all the voices of entreaty and anger, his only answer was a motion with the head and the short monosyllables,—

"No! No! No!"

This single word, thrown out amidst his sobs, was more eloquent than the longest speech, it expressed such deep suffering, love, and undaunted courage.

"Father," exclaimed Rafael, turning towards Saul, who sat alone and motionless. "Father! why do you not command him to humble himself? Bring him to reason, tell him to give up the writing to us, and we will carry it to the rabbi, and ask him to relent!"

When Rafael said this, Meir uncovered his face and turned it towards his grandfather.

Saul raised his head, stretched out his hands as if blindly groping for support, and then rose. The formerly dull eyes became all at once singularly restless, till they met with the fixed look of his grandson. He opened his mouth, but no words came.

"Speak father! command him!" urged several voices.

The old man seemed to totter on his feet. A cruel struggle took place within him. Several times he tried to speak, but could not—at last in a heavy whisper, he said,—

"He is not cursed yet—I am still allowed,—

"In the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, I bless you, son of my son!"

And trembling in every limb, his eyes full of tears, he sank back on his chair.

Those present exchanged glances full of amazement and reverence. Meir bounded forwards and threw himself at the feet of the old man. In a low, feverish voice he spoke of the love he bore him, about the Senior's legacy to his descendants, and that he would go out into the world and come back sometime. Then he rose from his knees and quickly left the room.

At this moment there was nobody near the windows of the house. The great crowd of people had retreated towards the middle of the square, and there they stood almost motionless, quietly whispering with each other. A singular thing happened. Scarcely had the messenger finished the reading of the sentence when the storm of wrath and anger suddenly subsided. What had happened to them? Their emotional nature, which, like a stringed instrument, answered to the slightest touch, quivered under a new feeling. It was respect and sympathy for the misfortune of an ancient and charitable family. The crowd, who such a short time before had yelled and cursed and was ready to tear everything to pieces, became suddenly quiet and subdued, and began to disperse peacefully. Here and there still sounded malicious laughter or insulting epithets, but more voices were heard in gentle pity.

"Yet he was good and charitable!"

"He never was proud!"

"He fed my foolish child and kissed it!"

"He saved my old father when the cart had fallen upon him!"

"He worked with us like a common man and sawed wood!"

"His face was shining with beauty and intelligence!"

"Cherem! cherem! cherem!"* repeated many, and shook their heads in wonder; faces paled with horror and breasts heaved with sighs.

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* **Excommunicated.**

CHAPTER XIII.

Three shadows glided swiftly over the moonlit fields which separated the town from the Karaïte's hill. The first belonged to a tall slender man, the second to a child, who clung to the sleeve of his garment; these two shadows were so close together that often they formed but one. the third shadow showed the outline of a burly figure, and kept carefully in the distance, now and then stood still or bent in two, at times disappeared altogether behind some palings, shrubs, or trees. It was evident the shadow wanted to hide itself and was looking for something, listening and watching for something or somebody.

At the open door of Abel's cottage a low voice called out,—

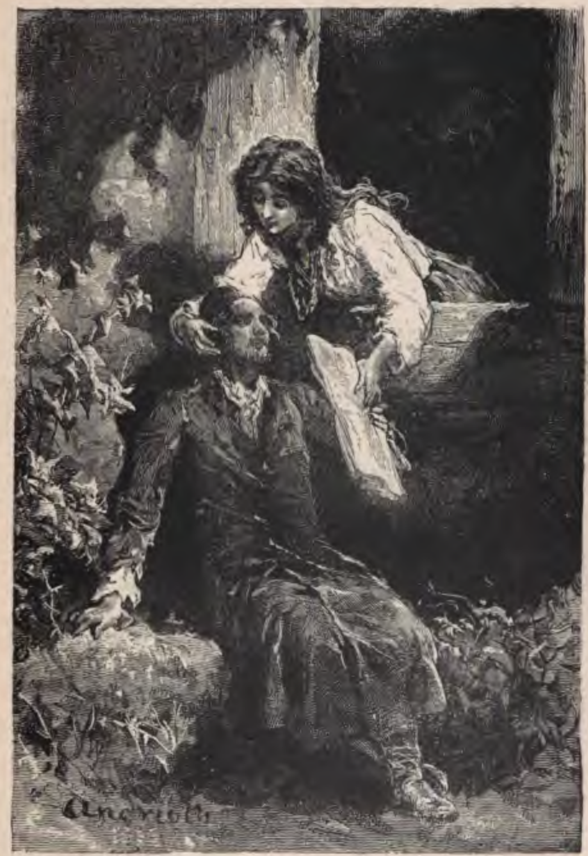
"Golda! Golda!"

From the window bent a face whitened with the moonlight, and surrounded by waves of rippling hair. A low passionate whisper sounded in the still evening air,—

"Meir! Meir! I heard a terrible noise and awful voices! My heart trembled in fear! but it is nothing now you are here!"

Two arms were stretched forth towards the approaching young man. The corals on her neck quivered under the throbbing emotion where sobs mingled with laughter.

Suddenly she uttered a piercing cry.



"Hide it on your breast and guard my treasure as the apple of your eye."—Page 311.

body but you. It is safe here, it is quiet, nobody will suspect."

Meir rose from the bench.

"Sleep in peace!" he said. "I must go; my soul is full of cries, I must walk, walk. I shall go and throw myself down amongst the trees, and send my prayers up to Jehovah with the evening breeze; I must unburden my mind of the heavy load."

He was going away, but Golda held him by the sleeve.

"Meir," she whispered, "tell me what has happened. Why did the people beat and hurt you? Why must you go out in the world?"

"People have beaten and stoned me," replied Meir, gloomily, "because I would not go against the truth; and would not agree to what the people agree. I must go, because to-morrow a terrible curse will be pronounced against me, and I shall be excommunicated and expelled from Israel."

"Cherim!" (the curse) shrieked the girl, and threw her folded hands in horror above her head. She stood thus a moment; then a gentle, thoughtful smile came into her face.

"Meir!" she whispered, "zeide is cursed and I am cursed; but the mercy of the Lord is greater than the greatest terror, and His justice vaster than the vastest sea. When zeide reads this he leaves off grieving and says:—'The cursed ones are happier than those that curse . . . because a time will come when the justice of the Lord will enter into the human heart, and then they will bless the names of those that have been cursed.'"

Meir looked long at the girl, whose deepset eyes glowed with inspiration.

"Golda!" he said softly, "you are the second half of my soul, come with me into the world as my wife; holding each other's hands, we will bear the curse together and live so that people shall bless our names."

A great wave of fire passed over Golda's face and left it radiant with ineffable joy.

"Oh Meir!" she exclaimed. She wanted to say something more, but could not. She bent her lithe figure very low and hung upon his arm.

He put his arm around her neck and pressed his lips to the wavy black hair. It was only a moment. The girl straightened herself and with the hot blush still dyeing her face and trembling mouth, she said softly,—"And zeide?"

Meir looked at her like a man suddenly aroused from sleep. She went on, in the same low voice,—

"His feet are so weak, he could not go with us, and besides he would never leave the graves of his fathers. How can I leave him? How could he live without me, whom he brought up with his hands, taught to spin, to read the Bible, and told all his beautiful stories? Who would feed him if I went away? Who during the cold winter nights would lie at his feet and warm his cold limbs? And when the soul is about to part from his body, who will rock the old head to its eternal sleep? Meir! Meir! you have a grandfather whose hair is white as snow, and who will rend his garments when you are gone. But your zeide has many sons, daughters and grandchildren, he is rich and respected by everybody. My zeide has only this poor hut, his old Bible, and his granddaughter Golda."

Meir sighed.

"You are right, Golda; but what will become of you when your grandfather dies and you remain alone in the world, exposed to poverty and human scorn?"

Golda sat down because her limbs trembled. She passed both her hands over her hot face, and with upraised eyes replied,—

"I shall sit before the door of this hut, spin my wool and tend the goats, looking along the road whence you will come back!"

It was an adaptation from the story of Akiba.

Meir asked dreamily,—

"And what will you do if people come and laugh at you and say,—'Akiba is drinking at the spring of wisdom whilst your body is consumed by misery, and your eyes dull from weeping?'"

A voice stifled with emotion, replied to him,—

"I shall answer thus: 'Let misery consume my body, and my eyes run over with tears, yet truly will I guard my husband's faith.' And if he stood before me and said: 'I have come back, because I did not wish you to weep any longer,' I should say to him: 'Go, and drink more.'"

Meir rose. There was no despair in his face now, but hope and courage were depicted in his whole bearing.

"I will come back, Rachel," he exclaimed, "Jehovah will give me strength, and good people will help me, if I show them my hard yearning after the knowledge and the writing of the Senior, which is the covenant of peace between Israel and the nations. I shall drink long and eagerly at the spring of wisdom, then come back, and teach my people, and for all the misery and contempt which you suffer, I shall put a golden crown upon your head."

Golda shook her head. The expression in her face showed she had been carried away by a wonderful dream. She dreamed she was Rachel, greeting her husband Akiba.

With passionate eyes and a far-away smile, she whispered,—"And I shall embrace your knees, and with eyes that have regained their former beauty, I shall look at all your glory and say: 'Lord and Master! your glory be my crown.'"

They looked long at each other, and through their tearful eyes there shone a love as deep and earnest as their hearts were pure and heroic.

A low, childish laughter reached their ears. They looked astonished in the direction whence it came. Upon the threshold of the hut sat Leibele holding in his arms a snow-white kid. The kid had been purchased at the fair, for the money Golda had taken for the baskets. The child had seen it in the entrance, brought it out on the threshold, and nestled his face to the soft white hair and laughed aloud.

"The child always follows you," said Golda.

"He kissed me to-day, when everybody beat and stoned me; with him I shielded my treasure against their strong hands," replied Meir. Golda disappeared from the window and stood on the threshold. She bent over the child, her flowing hair covering his head and shoulders, and kissed him on the forehead. Leibele was not frightened, h seemed to feel safe here. He had seen the girl before, whose luminous eyes looked at him with an expression of great sweetness. He raised his grateful, now almost intelligent, eyes to her, and whispered: "Allow me to play with the little goat?"

"Will you have some milk?" asked Golda.

"Yes," he said, "give me some."

She brought a bowl full of milk, and fed the child, then asked,—

"Why do you leave your father and mother, and follow Meir?"

The child rocked his head and replied,—

"He is better than daddy, and better than mammy. He fed me, and patted my head, and saved me from Reb Mosze."

"Whose little boy are you?" asked Golda.

Leibele remained silent, and kept on rocking his head. He evidently tried to collect his confused thoughts. Suddenly he raised his finger and pointed after the retreating figure of Meir, and said aloud,—

"I am his."

And he laughed; but it was not the laugh of an idiot any longer, only the expression of joy that he had found the way to clothe in words the thoughts of his loving little heart.

Golda looked in the direction where Meir had disappeared, and sighed heavily. Presently she rose, wrapped herself in a gray shawl, went halfway up the hill, and sat down under a dwarfed pine-tree. Perhaps she wanted to look down into space and watch for his return from the woods.

Her elbows resting on her knees, her face buried in her hands, she sat motionless, like a statue of sorrow; the black hair which covered her like a mantle, glittered and shone in the bright moonlight.

In the door of the hut sat Leibele fast asleep, still holding in his arms the white kid, which slept also.

At the same time the low door of the rabbi's hut was softly opened and Reb Mosze crept in, looking worn, ashamed, and troubled. He squatted down near the fireplace, and looked anxiously at Isaac Todros, who sat in the open window, his eyes fixed at the sky. "Rabbi!" he whispered, timidly.

"Rabbi!" he said a little louder, "your servant will look guilty in your eyes,—he has not brought the abominable writing. The storm was fearful; but his friends defended him, he himself resisted, and then a little child shielded him. The foolish people tore his clothes, beat, abused and stoned him, but did not take the writing from him.

"Nasi! your servant is ashamed and troubled, have mercy upon him, and do not punish him with the lightning of your eyes."

Todros, without taking his eyes off from the sky, said,—

"The writing must be taken from him and delivered into my hands."

"Nasi! the writing is not in his hands any longer."

"And where is it?" said the rabbi, in a louder voice, without turning round.

"Rabbi! I should not have dared to appear before you, had I not known what became of it. I followed him, my whole soul entered into my eyes and ears. I saw how he gave the writing to the Karaitish girl to hide it, I heard how he called it his treasure, and his passport to go into the world with, and which would open for him the hearts of the people."

Todros shuddered convulsively.

"It is true," he whispered angrily. "That writing will be to him a shield and weapon, at which our sharpest arrows will have no effect. Mosze!" he said, in a more determined voice, "the writing must be taken from the Karaitish girl."

The melamed crawled to his master's knees, and raising his face to him said, in a low voice,—

"Rabbi! the girl said she would lay down her life sooner than part with the writing."

Todros was silent for a moment, then repeated,—

"The writing must be taken from her."

The melamed remained silent and thoughtful a long time.

"Rabbi!" he said, in a very low whisper, "and if anything happens to the girl?"

Todros did not answer at once. At last he said,—

"Blessed is the hand that removes garbage from the house of Israel!"

The melamed seemed to drink in the words eagerly and ponder over their meaning. Then he smiled.

"Rabbi!" he said, "I have understood your wish—depend upon your servant,—he will find men whose hands are strong and hearts are steel.—Rabbi!" he added, entreatingly "let a gentle ray from your eyes fall upon your servant; let him see your wrath is softened towards him. My soul without your love and favor is like a well without water or a dark prison where no sun enters."

Todros replied,—

"No gentle ray will come from my eye, nor will my wrath be softened till the writing has been torn out of the accursed hands."

Mosze groaned.

"Rabbi, the writing shall be in your hands to-morrow."

The moon fell bright upon the faces of the men, of whom one looked at the heavens, the other into his master's face.

The master searched the heavens for the silvery streaks which are the ways the angels travel from star to star throughout eternity. The disciple looked into the master's eyes for the reflection of the mysterious light.

In both their heads was present the name of the angel of death whom they had conjured up; yet both their hearts were full of love and reverence.

CHAPTER XIV.

Extraordinary emotion prevailed amongst the population of the little town. From all parts they thronged towards the house of prayer, where, under the three-storied roof, the row of high and narrow windows blazed with light. The stars twinkled feebly and paled before the full moon.

The interior of the synagogue, large and roomy, would easily hold several thousand people. The high and smooth walls, forming a perfect square, were cut across by a long, heavy gallery, divided into niches, not unlike private boxes, and surrounded by a high, but transparent, grating. Wooden benches, closely standing together, filled the body of the synagogue from the entrance door up to the raised platform, which was surrounded with a highly ornamented grating. There was a table on that platform, used for unfolding the leaves of the Tora on days when extracts from it were read to the people. It served also as a pulpit when, on solemn days, speeches or religious teachings were delivered, Here also stood the choir of young men or grown-up children, who united their voices or answered to the intonating singer. The platform was about a dozen feet from the principal point of the building, which looked very impressive in its dignity and blaze of color. It was the altar, or the place where the holy of holies was preserved. The top of the altar reached up to the ceiling, and consisted of two great tables incrusted with lapis-lazuli and covered with white letters, like strings of arabesques, in a rich and fantastic design, in which the initiated eye read the ten commandments. The tables of lapis-lazuli were supported by two gilt-bronze lions of huge size resting upon two heavy columns of the intensest blue, surrounded with white garlands of vine-leaves and grapes. All this rose from a heavy stone foundation, the large surface of which from top to bottom was covered with inscriptions from the Bible. The two columns stood like powerful guards on either side of a deep recess, veiled entirely with a red silk curtain richly embroidered with gold. Behind this curtain, only raised at certain times, lay the holy of holies, the Tora, a great roll of parchment covered with costly silk and tied with ribbons embroidered in gold and silver. Seven chandeliers, of a hundred lights each, illuminated the gallery above, showing behind the transparent grating innumerable female figures in bright-colored dresses; below, the benches, where the men were sitting in their soft white talliths. Around the necks of the more prominent members gleamed large silver bands worked in delicate bas-relief. The costliest and largest of the seven chandeliers hung suspended by heavy silver cords before the red silk curtain, and reflected in the heavy gold embroidery, and showed the delicate design of the vine-leaves twining round the columns. Here stood Eliezer, the singer who intonated the old psalms, the limitless melodies of which resound with all the voices of human joy, suffering, and entreaty. Never had the beautiful voice produced richer or mellower tones; never had it vibrated with such deep emotion. It almost seemed as if that evening a superhuman power had taken possession of him. Now and then his voice died away in a low wail; then it rose again with such voluminous power of entreaty as if it carried him on the wings of his own voice before the throne of Jehovah-to plead for something or somebody.

The whole building was filled with the sound, in which now and then joined the choir of young voices. There was a deep silence amongst the congregation. Here and there somebody whispered,—

"It is like the angel Sandalphon, who offers to Jehovah the garlands made from human prayers."

Others shook their heads sadly: "He is pleading for his friend, who is to be excommunicated to-night."

Suddenly the singer's voice was interrupted by a heavy thump, repeated several times; it ceased as if the golden string had been torn asunder by a brutal hand. The choir disappeared from the platform, and in their place stood one man, whose dark, piercing eyes looked more baneful than ever. In both hands he held a heavy book, with which he struck the table as a signal for silence. Throughout the building everything was quiet, except in the portico, where some twenty people surrounded a young man who, with a deathly pale face and compressed lips, stood leaning against the wall.

Whisperers crowded around him.

"It is still time. Have mercy upon yourself and your family. Run quick, quick, throw yourself at the feet of the Rabbi! Oh cherem! cherem! cherem!"

He did not seem to listen. His arms were crossed over his breast. The contracted forehead, marked with the red scar, gave him the expression of inward pain, but also of inflexible courage.

"In the name of the God of our fathers," sounded the loud voice of Isaac Todros.

A long sigh like a tremor seemed to shake the whole congregation, and then everything became silent.

Isaac Todros spoke slowly and impressively,—

"By the force and power of the world, in the name of the holy covenant and the six hundred and thirteen commandments contained in the covenant,—with the malediction of Joshua against the town of Jericho, with the malediction of Elisha, against the children who mocked him, with the shamanta used by the great Sanhedrims and Synods, with all the cherems and curses used from the time of Moses to this day,—in the name of the God Eternal; in the name of Matatron, the guardian of Israel; in the name of the angel Sandalphon, who, from human prayers wreathes garlands for the throne of Jehovah; in the name of the Archangel Michael, the powerful leader of the heavenly army; in the name of the angels of fire, wind and lightning; in the name of all the angels conducting the stars in their courses, and all the archangels who are spreading their wings above the throne of the Eternal; in the name of Him who appeared in the burning bush, and by the power of which Moses divided the waters; in the name of the hand who wrote the tables of the holy Law;—we expel, disgrace, and curse, the strong, disobedient, and blasphemous Meir Ezofovitch, son of Benjamin."

He paused a little, and with a vehement motion, raised both his arms above his head and amidst the deepest silence, he went on faster and louder,—

"Be he accursed by heaven and earth; by the angels Matatron, Sandalphon, and Michael; by all the angels, archangels, and heavenly orbs. Be he accursed by all pure and holy spirits which serve the Lord;—accursed by every power in heaven and upon earth. Let all creation become his enemy, that the whirlwind crush him, and the sword smite him. Let his ways be dangerous and covered with darkness, and let the greatest despair be his only companion thereon. Let sorrow and unhappiness waste his body, let his eyes look upon the heavy blows falling upon him. Let the Lord never forgive him. Nay, let the wrath and revenge of the Lord eat deep into his marrow. Let him be wrapped up in the curse as in a garment; let his death be sudden and drive him into utter darkness."

Here Todros paused again, to draw a deep breath into his exhausted lungs. His voice had become every minute more labored, and his sentences more broken. His face was burning, and his arms waved wildly above his head.

"From this moment," he shouted again, "from the moment the curse has fallen upon him, let him not dare to approach the house of prayer nearer than four yards. Under the threat of excommunication, let no Israelite approach him nearer than four yards, nor open to him his house, or give him bread, water, or fire, though he saw him dying with thirst, hunger, and disease. Nay, let everybody spit upon him and throw stones under his feet, that he may stumble and fall. Let him not have any fortune, either what he has earned himself or what comes from his parents; let it be given up to the elders of the Cahala, to be used for the poor and needy.

"This curse which has fallen upon him, let it be made public all over Israel, wherever you go, and we will send the tidings of it to all our brethren to the farthest confines of the world.

"This is our decree, and you all who remain faithful unto the Lord and His covenant, live in peace."

He had finished, and at the same time, by some arranged contrivance, all the light in the seven chandeliers grew dim, and in the four corners of the edifice, trumpets began to sound in a low, mournful wail, in which joined a chorus of sobs and loud moans. A heartrending cry came from the portico, which was all the more terrible, as it came from the breast of a young and powerful man. There was a noise of many feet and the sound of somebody driven out. Meir disappeared from the house of prayer. Amongst the benches, near the altar, came the sound of rent garments and grave men fell down on their faces.

"In the dust lies the mighty house of Ezofovitch," said several voices pointing at them.

From the gallery came the loud sobs and wailing of women, and in the background of the edifice, people without silver ribbons round their tilliths, wrung their hard, work-stained hands.

Todros wiped the perspiration from his brow, with his ragged sleeve, and leaning upon the balustrade with heaving breast and twitching lips, looked at the singer. He did not leave the platform and looked at the singer, for, according to prescribed rules, a blessing for all the people ought to follow the curse. It was the singer's duty to intonate it. Todros waited for it. Why did the singer delay so long? Why did he not take up his last words: 'live in peace' and intonate the blessing? Eliezer stood with his face turned to the altar. Whilst the rabbi pronounced the curse, his whole frame shook under the folds of the tallith. By and by he grew quieter, stood motionless, and his eyes seemed to look far, far in the distance. At last he raised his arms. It was the sign for silence and prayer. The trumpets which had kept on the low, mournful wailing, grew silent, the human sobs and cries ceased. The dim light blazed up again, and amidst the deepest silence, interrupted by some stifled sobs, rose the pure and silvery voice of Eliezer,—

"Oh Lord, who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, David, the prophets of Israel and all righteous people, pour down your blessing upon the man who this day has been injured by an unjust curse.

"God, in your mercy shield and guard him from all unhappiness, prolong the years of his life, and bless all his undertakings. Release him from distress and darkness, and fetters, together with all his brethren in Israel.

"Do this, O Lord. Say all unto me, Amen."

He stopped, and there was a short silence of stupefaction, and then out of several hundred throats came the cry, Amen! Amen! called out the members of the Ezofovitch family, who rose from the floor, shaking the dust from their rent garments. Amen! called out the group of poor people who had wrung their black, work-stained hands.

"Amen!" came from the gallery the voices of the weeping women. "Amen!" repeated at last a chorus of young voices.

The rabbi took his hands off the balustrade and looked around the congregation with amazed eyes.

"What is that? What does this mean?"

Then Eliezer turned his face to him and the people. The hood of his tallith had slipped from his head on to his shoulders. His usually white face was flushed, and his blue eyes glowed with anger and courage. He raised his hand and said in a loud voice,—

"Rabbi! it means that our ears and our hearts will not listen to any such curses any more!"

These words were like the signal for battle. Scarcely had he finished speaking, when some fifty young men ranged themselves on either side of him. Some were the excommunicated man's personal friends, others had only seen him from a distance, amongst them were even those who had blamed him and condemned his rashness.

"Rabbi!" they called out, "we will hear such curses no more!"

"Rabbi! your curse has made us love the accursed!"

"Rabbi! with that cherem you have laid a burden upon a man who was pleasant in the eyes of God and man!"

Todros with a mighty effort seemed to rouse himself from the numbness into which the unexpected rebellion had plunged him.

"What is it you want!" he shouted "What are you speaking of. Has the evil spirit bewitched you? Do you not know that our Law commands to curse those that rebel against the holy covenant?"

Not from amongst the young men, but from the benches where the elders were sitting, came a grave voice,—

"Rabbi! do you not know, that when the old Sanhedrim were in fierce debate whether to adhere to the teaching of Hillel or Shamai, a mysterious voice, 'Bat Kohl,' taken for the voice of God himself, was heard: 'Listen to the Law of Hillel, for it is full of charity and gentleness.'"

All heads were craned in the direction whence the speech had come. It came from Rafael, the uncle of the excommunicated.

At this moment Ber made his way through the crowd and stood at the side of the young men.

"Rabbi!" he exclaimed, "have you ever counted the intellects you and your forefathers crushed with your despotism; all the souls eager for knowledge you thrust into darkness and suffering?"

"Rabbi!" said a youthful, almost childish voice, "will you and those that stand by you, always keep from us all knowledge after which our minds are yearning?"

"Why do you, Rabbi, not teach the people to use their intelligence as a sieve, to divide the grain from the chaff, and the pearls from the sand? Rabbi! you have made us eat the pomegranate with the bitter rind, we begin to feel the acrid taste of it and it causes pain."

"Unhappy, misguided youths! reprobates," shouted Todros passionately, "did you not see with your own eyes, that the people hated him, stoned him, and marked his forehead with a red scar?"

Proud and scornful laughter answered his speech.

"Do not agree with everything the people say," and one voice continued: "The curse you pronounced against him has softened many hearts and opened many eyes."

"Malicious promptings stirred up hatred against him, but to day all hearts are full of compassion, because with your curse you have killed his youth."

"It is worse than death, rabbi, for amongst the living he will be like one dead."

"And is it not written in the statutes of the great Sanhedrim 'The tribunal which once in seventy years pronounces a sentence of death will be called the tribunal of murderers?'

"In the Sanhedrim did not sit childless and stony-hearted men."

"Who soweth wrath, reapeth sorrow!"

Such and similar were the sentences which fell like hail around the rabbi, accompanied by threatening looks and indignant gestures.

Todros did not answer any more. He remained quite motionless and, with his mouth open and raised eyebrows, presented the picture of a man who does not understand what is going on around him. Suddenly, the melamed rushed from the crowd, jumped over the balustrade, and spreading out his arms as if to shield the beloved master, confronted the people and shouted in angry tones,—

"Woe! woe! to the insolent who does not reverence those who serve them before the Lord!"

Eliezer replied :

"No wall is to be raised between the Lord and his people. We appointed men from amongst us to study the law in order to teach it to the ignorant. But we did not tell them, 'we deliver our souls unto you in bondage'; because every Israelite is free to search for the Lord in his own heart and to explain His words according to his intelligence."

Others exclaimed,—

"In Israel there are no higher and lower grades. We are all brethren in the eyes of the Creator, nobody has the right to fetter our will and intellect."

"The false prophets have lost us, because they divided us from other nations, that we are even as prisoners in the dark, left in loneliness."

"But a time will come when Israel will shake off his fetters, and the blind and proud spirits will fall down from their heights and the imprisoned souls will regain their liberty."

Isaac Todros raised his hands slowly to his head as a man who tries to rouse himself from sleep; then he leaned again upon the balustrade, raised his eyes, and sighed deeply,—

"Ensoph!" he said, in dreamy whisper.

It was the cabalistic name of God which whirled across his despairing mind. But as if in protest against the doctrines which had encumbered the pure Mosaic faith, a chorus of voices answered,—"Jehovah!"

The melamed's body shook as in a fit of ague. With violent speech and gesture, he called upon the people to stand up for their beloved sage, and punish the audacious rebels. But the more he spoke, the more amazed he grew. Nobody moved. The rich and prominent members of the community sat silent, their foreheads supported on their hands, their eyes riveted to the floor ; they were in deep meditation. The bulk of the people remained motionless and mute.

The melamed understood at last that all efforts to rouse them were useless. He became silent, but his eyes opened wider in great wonder ; he could not understand why they did not listen.

But through the misty brain of Isaac Todros passed a ray of light and he got a glimpse of the terrible truth. Something whispered to him that in the young breasts all the dormant desires and aspirations, of which the excommunicated man had been the interpreter had stirred into life. The young man was, then, not the only one ; but he was bolder, more enterprising, and proud. He heard another whisper. The young heads whose bold attitude had made him powerless to-day, had been touched by the wing of the angel of Time ; which, as he perceived in a dull, indistinct way, was full of rebellion and upheaving, and would break down the barriers he had raised between them and the highest truth. And he heard again why the people had not stood up for him, because the angel of Time, who carries with him rebellion and battle, also brings charity and forgiveness, and sweeps away curses and hatred with his powerful yet soft wings.

All this Todros heard in a dim and vague way, but it was enough to benumb his heart, full of petrified faith and pride.

"Bat Kohl," he whispered.

The voice of his own conscience he took for the mysterious voice said to be heard in great crises by the lawgivers and priests of Israel.

"Bat Kohl," he repeated with trembling lips, and turned his gaze around the building.

The interior of the synagogue was half empty. The people dispersed slowly and silently. There was the rustle of the belated women in the gallery, and then everything was quiet and deserted.

CHAPTER XV.

LIKE Joseph Akiba, coming back in the moonlit night, pale and trembling to his shepherd's hut, so Meir approached the house of his fathers.

He went towards it, but without the intention of entering it any more. He knew that he would have to go away, to pursue in loneliness and misery the great aim he saw in the far, far distance, and which was so difficult to reach. He wanted to see the house once more, but did not intend to cross its threshold. Amongst the many darkened windows, he saw one where a light glimmered. He stood still and looked at it. Through the window he saw the motionless figure of the great grandmother in her easy-chair. A wave of moonlight made the diamonds sparkle.

Meir slowly ascended the steps of the porch and touched the door latch. It yielded to the pressure. Against the usual custom the door was unlocked. He entered the narrow passage and stood in the door of the sitting-room, which was wide open. The whole house was wrapped up in darkness and silence.

Was everybody asleep ? Not likely, but not the slightest noise was to disturb the last farewell between great-grandmother and her great-grandson and drive him from her knees. Meir knelt down before the sleeping woman, who smiled in her dream and put his head upon her knees. It was the last time he rested under the roof of his fathers.

"Bobe," he said softly, "Elte Bobe!"

Freida slept peacefully as a child, the rays of the moonlight played on the wrinkled face like childish dreams.

"I shall never see you again, never any more."

He pressed his lips to the dear old hand, which had given him the treasure which was his salvation and ruin, life and death.

Frieda's head moved gently.

"Kleiniskind!" she whispered, without opening her eyes.

Meir lost himself in thoughts. His forehead resting on the great-grandmother's knees, he said farewell to everything and everybody around.

At last he rose and slowly left the room.

In the dark passage he felt suddenly two strong arms closing around him and a heavy object was put in his pocket.

"It is I, Ber. Your grandfather looked around the family for a courageous man who would give you a handful of money on the way; and found me. Everybody in the house mourns for you,—the women have taken to their beds, crying, your uncles are angry with the rabbi and the elders,—the grandfather is almost beside himself with grief, but nobody will see you any more. It is thus with us; reason drags one way, the old faith the other. They are afraid. But Meir, do not you grieve! You are happy, I envy you! You have not been afraid to do what I did not dare to do, and you will win. To-day your friends stood up for you, and the people were silent and did not defend the rabbi. It is the beginning; but the end is still far off. If you showed yourself to-morrow before the people, their wrath would flare up again. Go! go into the world. You have youth on your side and courage; life is before you.

"Sometime you will come back and put an end to our sins and darkness. We have many diamonds, but they want sifting. Go forth now to conquer. Be like Baale Tressim, armor-clad like our ancestors, and my blessing and the blessings of those who like me wished but could not; longed, but did not obtain what they longed for; be with you."

They exchanged farewells, and Ber disappeared as silently as he had come. The deep silence of the whole house seemed to bid the excommunicated youth to go hence.

When he left the house, it had begun to dawn. The market square and adjacent streets were asleep. The whole town was wrapped in the gray mist of an almost autumnal morning.

He swiftly crossed the mist-covered fields to get away and say farewell to her, who had promised to be a faithful Rachel to him and claim from her his treasure.

The door and window of the little hut stood wide open.

"Golda!" he called softly, "Golda!"

There was no answer.

He repeated his call, but the silence remained unbroken. He drew nearer and looked at the spot where old Abel was wont to sit, it was empty.

A strange, undefined dread took hold of him.

He looked around, up the hills and along the fields, and called in a loud voice,—

"Golda!"

There was a slight rustle not far off. It came from a wild rose-bush, from amongst the branches of which rose the sleepy figure of little Leibele.

Meir went quickly up to him. The child disengaged himself from the branches and put his hand under his coat.

"Where is Golda?" asked Meir.

Leibele did not answer, but handed to him the roll of papers.

Meir bent towards the child.

"Who gave you that?"

"She," answered Leibele, pointing to the hut.

"When did she give it to you?"

The child answered,—

"When the people were coming, she rushed out of the hut, woke me, and put the roll under my coat, and said, 'Give it to Meir when he comes.'"

Meir began to tremble.

"And afterwards?" he asked, "afterwards?"

"Afterwards, moreine, she hid me in the bush, and went back to the hut."

"How many people were there?"

"Two, moreine, three—ten—I do not know."

"And what did they do? What did the people do?"

"The people came, moreine, and shouted and screamed at her to give up the writing, and she screamed that she would, would not, and the goat in the entrance, ran about and bleated."

Meir trembled in all his limbs.

"And then what happened?"

"Moreine, she took the spindle into her hands and stood before her zeide. I saw it from the bush. She was so white, and the spindle was white, and the people were black —and amongst them the goat kept on running and bleating."

"And then? and then?"

"Then, moreine, I did not look any longer, but cowered down in fear, because in the hut there was such a noise, such moans. Then the people went away—and carried her —and carried her grandfather, and the goat ran up the hill bleating, and I do not know where it has gone."

Meir straightened himself and looked up to the sky with stony eyes. He knew everything now.

"Where did they carry them?" he asked in a dull whisper.

"There."

The outstretched arm of the child pointed in the direction where, in the gray mist, the meadow was dimly visible and the pond—beyond the pond were marshes and bogs, where two lifeless bodies could sink easily. There, beyond the meadows, where in spring she had gathered yellow lilies amongst the rushes, and unconsciously betrayed her fresh and innocent love,—there, hidden from all human eyes, she was lying at the feet of her grandfather, wrapped in the wealth of her black hair.

A threefold cry of Jehovah rung out in the still morning air, and only Leibele remained before the door, holding in his raised hand the scroll of paper.

Meir had gone into the hut.

What a terrible story was revealed to him; the straw lying about Abel's couch, and amongst it, like drops of blood, Golda's red corals? The broken spindle and the old Bible torn in shreds told their tale. It was a long and cruel tale, to which the young man listened, his head pressed against the old wall; a tale so long that hours passed over his head and he still listened with beating heart and trembling limbs.

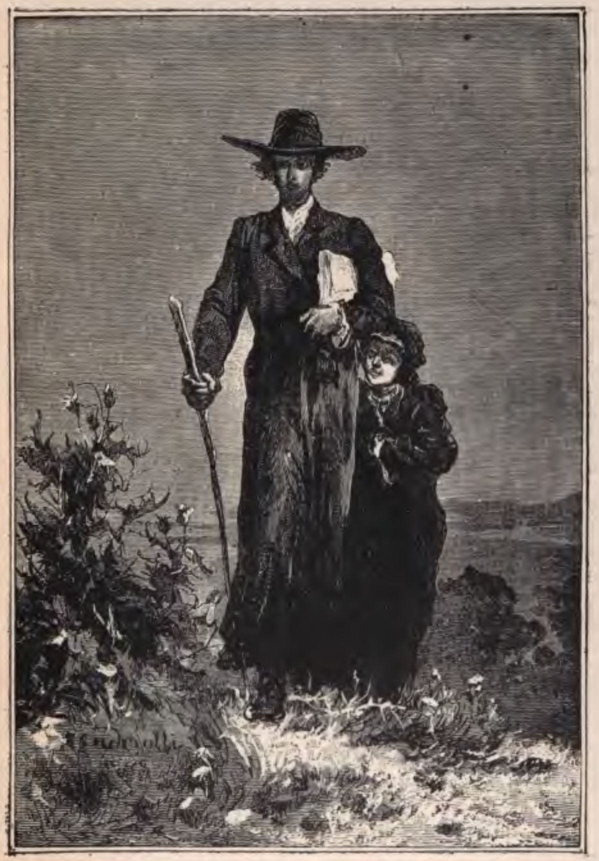
When he stood again upon the threshold the sun was brightly shining. How terribly changed he looked. The forehead, marked with the red scar, was seamed and corrugated as if long years of suffering had ploughed the once smooth surface. The half-shut eyes had a dull, despairing lustre, and his arms hung down limp and powerless. He stood thus a few minutes as if intently listening for the sound of the voice he should hear never more; when a weak hand tugged at his clothes and a small voice said,—

"Moreine."

Leibele stood before him, his mournful eyes raised up to him, and stretched out the hand which held a roll of paper.

It seemed as if the sight of the papers reminded Meir of something, roused him from sleep, and told him to do something which was sacred and important. He passed both hands over his forehead and then took the Senior's legacy from the child's hands, and at the touch of it he raised his head and his eyes seemed to regain their old power and courage.

He looked at the town waking up from sleep and murmured something in a low voice. Something about Israel, its past greatness and its great sins, and that he would



"And tucking his hands under his sleeves he walked slowly and gravely after him."—Page 339

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